

Studying the Images of the Wind and the Snake in S. T. Coleridge's Trio¹ and “Dejection: An Ode”

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Abstract

The images of the wind and the snake are essential components in Coleridge's set of imagery. The two images are related because the wind is a catalyst of the poet's imagination and creativity as is the image of the snake, which is an emblem of organic wholeness and unity. However, the wind is also used in Coleridge's poetry in its original sense—that is, as an element in nature. The same is true about the snake, which is often used as a representative of destruction because of its poisonous nature. The Trio and “Dejection: An Ode” were selected for the study of these images because they are among, if not the most famous, of Coleridge's poems. The paper also discusses the interpretation of the snake in sexual terms by certain scholars.

Keywords: *Christabel*, creativity, “Dejection: An Ode,” “Kubla Khan,” sexual interpretation, snake, *The Ancient Mariner*, wind

1. Introduction

The elements in nature play major roles in the writings of all the romantic poets; one of these elements is the wind (Schulz, 1964), which “functions as a key image” in “Dejection: An Ode” (p. 33) and is often used in *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*. This image in Coleridge's poetry often symbolizes, to use Coleridge's (1962) terms in *Biographia Literaria*, either the common ordinary faculty of “the primary imagination” or “the secondary imagination”—that is, the creative faculty (Vol. p. 12). However, the image of the wind as a symbol of the imagination is not a Coleridge invention but (Suther, 1965) “from time immemorial the wind has seemed to furnish an apt symbol for active inspiration” (pp. 117-18). Schulz (1964) says, “Coleridge clearly identifies a tumultuous wind with the sublime soaring of the creative imagination” (p. 234). However, Wheeler (1981) considers the wind to be “often an image of imagination” (p. 96).

The image of the snake is similar in its ambivalence as that of the wind in the sense that it is used as a symbol of unity or a poisonous, dangerous reptile. In one of his letters, Coleridge related the image of the snake with the idea of organic unity and wholeness (Griggs, 1956): “The common end of all narrative, nay, of all Poems is to convert a series into a Whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a strait Line, assume to our Understandings, a circular motion—the snake with its Tail in its Mouth” (Vol. 4, p. 545). Coleridge may have been influenced by his friend William Hazlitt, who associated the snake with the imagination: The principle of the imagination resembles the emblem of the serpent, by which the ancient typified wisdom and the universe, with undulating folds, for-ever varying and for-ever flowing into itself—circular, and without beginning or end. The definite, the fixed, is death: the principle of life is the indefinite, the growing, the moving, and the continuous. (Cited in Beer, 1977, p. 270)

However, Coleridge sometimes used the snake in a negative sense as he indicated in his Notebook no. 2368, when he referred to drugs as a serpent that suffocated him: “only as the means of escaping from pains that coiled round my mental powers, as a serpent around the body & wings of an Eagle!” (Cited in Beer, 1977, p. 213).

¹Scholars refer to Coleridge's three famous poems, “Kubla Khan,” *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and *Christabel*, as the Trio.

This is also true in Coleridge's drama, *Zapolya*, when one of the characters addresses his friend: "No, serpent! No, 'tis you that sting me; you" (*The Complete Works*, p. 281). However, some of the scholars are inclined toward a sexual interpretation for the snake, and this will be discussed.

2. The Image of the Wind

The wind is a constituent part of the epigraph in "Dejection," in which the stormy wind foretells the coming of a great danger that leads to the drowning both the captain and his crew in the sea: "I fear, fear, my Master dear! / We shall have a deadly storm." This is an ordinary, destructive stormy wind. On the other hand, as Walsh (1973) says, "The other, deeper note, which the epigraph has touched warningly, is taken up successively in a number of places in the first stanza" (p. 132) in which the wind establishes another role other than the one in the epigraph; thus the wind has adopted a greater role as a catalyst of the poet's imagination rather than that of molding:

yon cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute. (p. 363, ll. 5-8)²

In Yarlott's opinion (1967), the wind in "Dejection" turned the poet's "soul inward to gloomy and viperish introspection" (p. 263). This association between the wind and poetic creativity is clear when Coleridge expected the wind to rise and sent his "soul abroad" (p. 363, ll. 17-18). The image of the wind as a "Mad Lutanist" (p. 367, l. 104) is directly associated with poetic creativity. Eddins (2000) considers that Coleridge "joins an association with the rising wind as the spiritus of the imagination." Thus, the wind is a savior in "Dejection" because whenever the poet realizes that his poetic powers are in danger or are about to fade and vanish, he turns to the wind, the motivator of his imagination, for help. Coleridge yearns for the revivifying wind that will dispel his spiritual lethargy: "Reality's dark dream! / I turn from you, and listen to the wind" (p. 367, ll. 95-96). Unfortunately, Schulz (1964) says that regardless "of how hard" the wind "blows, it will find little fruit or foliage to harvest from the 'dark-brown gardens' and 'peeping flowers'" (p. 234).

However, when the wind in "Dejection" is associated with winter, barrenness and the "Devils' yule" (p. 367, l. 106), it is the ordinary wind, but when Coleridge addresses the wind as "Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds! / Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!" (p. 367, ll. 108-09), this indicates the wind of creativity because it is associated clearly with poetry and a poetic frenzy. In Schulz's opinion (1964), the difference between the two types of storms symbolizing "fertility-sterility" is that the wind is both a destroyer and creator. This "ambiguity of the wind image persists throughout the poems and furnishes one of the prime symbolic vehicles of Dejection" (pp. 33, 73).

Therefore, the poet in "Dejection" hastens to listen to the noises made by the wind to escape his stalemate state of dejection because, in Prasad's opinion (2007), "The wind is the symbolic catalytic agent for turning the poet's mind from viper thoughts to more benign ones" (p. 175). Schmid (2010) says that "Dejection" "seems to represent not so much painful feeling as painful *lack* of feeling, one that resists stimulation and movement" (p. 173). Thus, Coleridge, in his state of pain and dejection, turned to the wind within him, which is unnoticed:

I turned from you, and listen to the wind,
Which long has raved unnoticed. (p. 367, ll. 96-97)

This is the wind in the fathomless sea of man's spirituality that is marked by the deeply-felt loneliness of the poet represented in the poem by the wind blowing:

Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither wood man never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home. (p. 367, ll. 100-103)

Unlike the ambivalent status of the wind in "Dejection," this image is different in *Christabel* because it is often associated with coldness and barrenness in nature; therefore, it is a symbol of spiritual exsiccation.

²Hereafter, I use pages or page and line numbers (in parentheses) to refer to quotations from Coleridge's poetry taken from *Coleridge: Poetical Works*. Ed. E. H. Coleridge. London: OUP. Available online at <https://archive.org/details/completepoetical004225mbp>

With reference to the atmosphere of the poem, one can easily conclude that there is no chance of Christabel's spiritual revival, and this is felt from the moaning of the wind: "Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?" (p. 217, l. 44). The atmosphere of imaginative lifelessness in *Christabel* is established through the image of the stillness of the wind:

There is not wind enough in the air
To move away the ringlet curl
From the lovely lady's cheek—. (p. 217, ll. 45-47)

These images of the wind show that the vividness within Christabel is lost, and she is about to lose the battle in front of her foe Geraldine, the serpent, who symbolizes the powers of destruction. However, "To shield her and shelter her from damp air" (p. 225, l. 278) is an indication that the wind could not work within Christabel to protect her from these dangerous, destructive powers that make her silent. Symbolically, the poet is blocked from creativity as Christabel who is, in Mulvihill's opinion, (2008) "prevented from saying what she knows."

The implications of the image of the wind in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are different from that in *Christabel* because the ambivalence of the image of the wind clearly refers on the one hand, to the ordinary wind, and on the other hand, to creativity and poetic imagination. The difference between the two uses of the wind is easily noticed if a comparison is drawn between the following lines: "And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he / Was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his overtaking wings / And chased us south along" (p. 188, ll. 41-44) and "Like a meadow-gale of spring— /.... It mingled strangely with my fears, / Yet it felt like a welcoming" (p. 204, ll. 457-59). The former is the known wind whereas the latter is a representation of the poetic imagination. This connection between the wind and imagination in *The Ancient Mariner* was established by a number of scholars who associated the Mariner's acts with poetic creativity. For example, Neumann (1959) related the Mariner's activities with the drying up of the "fecundating imagination" (p. 160). Thus, one can easily notice that the ordinary wind is associated with coldness as is shown in the following lines:

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast-high, came floating by
...
The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around. (p. 188, ll. 51-53, 59-60)

Even the transition from the Mariner's ordinary self to the creative self is marked by the stillness of the air:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breathe nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean. (pp. 190-91, ll. 115-18)

This transition stage comes to an end after the Mariner's blessing of the water snakes that release him from a bondage that haunts him. The Mariner's spiritual revival is marked by the blowing of the wind: "And soon I heard a roaring wind" (p. 199, ll. 310). Finally, it is worth noticing that the wind of creativity blows only on a unique person: "On me alone it blew" (p. 204, l. 464), and it is spiritually sweet:

Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze—
On me alone it blew. (p. 204, ll. 463-64)

The third poem in the Trio, "Kubla Khan," is strikingly free of wind imagery except an indication of its presence in the image of the "floating hair" (p. 298, l. 50). The poem is exclusively about poetic creativity, and the poet is immersed in his imagination; therefore does not need the wind to awaken him.

3. *The Image of the Snake*

The image of the snake is similar to that of the wind because Coleridge used it ambivalently—that is, he related it to goodness and creativity and also as a dangerous creature and, thus, a symbol of harm and evil. This image is used in both "Dejection" and the Trio, but the symbolic implications of this image are different in each of these poems according to the atmosphere of the poem.

The serpent is used in “Dejection” and *Christabel* in the Christian and traditional sense—that is, as a symbol of wickedness and evil forces because the main character in each poem is defeated and cannot express what is within the self. Frye (1990) believes that “the serpent, because of its role in the Garden of Eden story, usually belongs on the sinister side of our catalogue in Western literature” (p. 157).

The snake in “Dejection” is used as a symbol of what kills the poet in Coleridge or hinders his imagination:

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
Reality’s dark dream! (p. 367, ll. 94-95)

In Coleridge’s opinion, “abstruse research” (p. 367, l. 89) is a snake because it steals “all the natural man” (p. 367, l. 90) from him.

As is the case in “Dejection,” the serpent in *Christabel* embodies and symbolizes evil forces working constantly to destroy Christabel. Thus, Sir Leoline, when angry, promised to “dislodge” the “reptile souls” of those who kidnapped Geraldine:

My tourney court—that there and then
I may dislodge their reptile souls
From the bodies and forms of men! (p. 229, ll. 441-43)

However, in a sudden revelation, Christabel saw Geraldine in her real form; thus, she reacts by shuddering “with a hissing sound” (p. 230, l. 591), as if identifying herself with her oppressor—that is, Geraldine, the snake. The snake in this context is the poisonous snake, which symbolizes evil.

The striking, clear image, which includes both Christabel and Geraldine, is the dove and snake in Bracy’s dream. Bracy considered the dove and the snake to be representative of both Christabel and an evil. Thus, Bracy tries to convince Sir Leoline that Christabel is facing a dangerous snake, so it is necessary to put off his—that is, Bracy’s journey to Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine’s mansion to drive away the evil force from or around Leoline’s castle.

Therefore, he says to Leoline,
Yet might I gain a boon of thee,
This day my journey should not be,
So strange a dream hath come to me,

...

When lo! I saw a bright green snake
Coiled around its wings and neck,
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Close by the dove’s its head it crouched;
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,

Swelling its neck as she swelled hers! (pp. 232-33, ll. 523-25, 543-48)

The snake in Bracy’s dream clearly suggests the presence of a serious danger to Christabel, but in Baumbach’s opinion (2015), “the Baron could not comprehend” that the snake in “the dream referred to Geraldine” (p. 118). Geraldine’s evil nature is clear because she is identified with the serpent when she looks at Christabel:

A snake’s small eye blinks dull and shy;
And the lady’s eyes they shrunk in her head,
Each shrunk up to a serpent’s eye,
And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread,
At Christabel she looked askance!— (p. 233, ll. 585-89)

This horrible scene of Geraldine’s serpent eyes is constantly present in Christabel’s mind, and she cannot forget this vision:

She nothing sees—no sight but one!

...

That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,
That all her features were resigned
To this sole image in her mind. (p. 234, ll. 600, 604-06)

Unlike the evil implications of the image of the snake in *Christabel* and “Dejection: An Ode,” the snake is associated with happiness and poetic creativity in “Kubla Khan” and *The Ancient Mariner*.

It is used, according to Beer (1977), in the latter two poems in the Grecian sense that imagined the snake as “winged” or “twined” “around the staff of Aesculapius.” However, at the same time, “the coiling movement of the serpent” is “turned into ultimate harmony” (pp. 9, 56). Thus, in “Kubla Khan,” the movement of “the sacred river,” which is the source of life for the gardens and its surroundings, is described as being similar to a snake’s movement:

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran. (p. 297, ll. 25-26)

This image of the snake, in the context of the poem, symbolizes the glory of poetic creativity. On the other hand, in *The Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner’s appreciation of the snakes marks the start of his spiritual revival and the commencement of his happiness:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam, and every track
Was a flash of golden fire. (p. 198, ll. 278-82)

Later, the Mariner blessed the water snakes in his heart and the image reflects how spontaneous artistic creativity is:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare;
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware. (p. 198, ll. 283-86)

By and large, the blessing of the water-snakes is the Mariner’s (Stokes, 2008) “moment of release.” In light of this interpretation, Beer (1977) says, “the bright movements of the water-snakes can be seen to mirror the poet’s delight at the play of energies of his own mind” (p. 179).

4. Sexual Interpretation of the Snake

There are suggestions by a number of scholars that interpret Coleridge’s poems in Freudian sexual terms, including the snake. For example, Fruman (1972) discussed interpreting “Kubla Khan” sexually (pp. 399-400), as did House (1953, p. 118). Khan (2012) compares the “geological activity” in “Kubla Khan” and the “thick pants” of the fountain that gives water to the snake-like river to “the mother’s womb, climaxing sexual intercourse, reproduction, and childbirth “and considers the “garden’s physical beauty and its carefully constructed harmonies “as having an “underlying natura—we might say, libidinal—energies” (p. 152). Pritchard (2006) noted that the reason behind such interpretations is what many believe about Coleridge’s “sexual hang-ups.”

Let us consider Knight’s sexual interpretation of Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner* and “Kubla Khan” as two examples for discussion. Knight (1968) related the water snakes and the Mariner’s voyage with sexuality and considers the “dryness” in *The Ancient Mariner* as a symbol of sexual starvation and links sexual fulfillment with death (pp. 86, 95). I think that such an argument seems to be a bit far-fetched as it is not supported by the developments in the poem, the accounts of the Mariner’s exploits or even his character. If the water snakes and the voyage were a matter of sexual fulfillment, there is no reason why the Mariner should have been selected as the protagonist because there is clearly nothing sexually special in him to be singled out from among the crew. In fact, Knight’s account raises a number of questions that cannot be easily answered: 1. What is the relationship between the Mariner’s unique spirituality and his sexuality? 2. Why is the Wedding-Guest affected deeply, and why does he become wiser and sadder? 3. Why do the majority of the people represented by the crew die? 4. Are the majority of the people prevented from sexual fulfillment, or are they incapable of it? If sexual fulfillment is believed to be responsible for the elevation of the Mariner’s self to a level in which his creative self is able to see the spirit in nature, then it tends to imply that all people who have fulfilled their sexual desires are creative artists, which seems to be far from what Coleridge proposes or even what the Romantics as a whole believed.

On the other hand, Knight (1968) connected the sacred river in “Kubla Khan” with sexual energy with its snake-like movement because “whatever our minds make of them, sex-forces have their way.” The sacred river, which is “meandering with a mazy motion” like a snake, is understood as being associated with sex, which “is not only Biblical but occurs in myth and poetry, ancient and modern” (pp. 91-92).

I do not think this is a correct interpretation because in a prefatory note on “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge stated that the poem was “published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity [Lord Byron], and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed merits” (p. 295). Thus, a sexual interpretation moves the poem far from its original purpose. I believe that the claim that the images in “Kubla Khan” reflect the sexual world seems to arise from a forced connection between sex and certain images in poetry, which is extremely doubtful because many ideas and thoughts connected with the deep unconscious cannot be probed for certainty. It is true, as MacCannell (1986) cited Lacan saying that the concept of “sex and death of the individual is fundamental” (p. 159), but Lacan does not connect these concepts with artistic creativity—bearing in mind that the creative life is unlike the organic life. It is unreasonable to associate creativity with sexuality. However, Knight tries, without adequate evidence or good reason, to force the images to comply with his ideas by mingling the creative life and sex. In line with the atmosphere in “Kubla Khan,” it makes more sense to say that the sacred river symbolizes the poet's source of giving and rejuvenation. Frye (1990) says, “It is inadvisable to assume that an Adonis or Oedipus myth is universal, or that certain associations, such as the serpent with the phallus, are universal” simply because there are “a group of people who know nothing of such matters” (p. 118). Moreover, there are also a number of scholars who questioned the validity of interpreting the snake as an indication of a sexual symbol. For example, Silhol (2006) expresses his doubt in interpreting “gardens bright with sinuous rills” as “a phallic snake.”

5. Conclusion

Both the images of the wind and snake are related to the central theme in Coleridge's poems—that is, poetic imagination and innovation. Through these images, Coleridge makes the intangible—that is, goodness and poetic creativity—tangible. This is done with the Coleridgean method of forming his images by bringing (Swanepoel, 2010) “the scene into being by assessing known in terms of unknown.” The wind and the snake are juxtaposed only in “Dejection,” in which the snake-like viperous thoughts are driven by the wind of the imagination:

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,

Reality's dark dream!

I turn from you, and listen to the wind. (p. 367, ll. 94-96)

I conclude the study of the images of the wind and the snake by stating that the poet is always hopeful because despite the poet's dejection, he believes that the wind of creativity will be a “coming-on of rain and squally blast” (p. 363, l. 14), and the horizon is one of triumph. This is fulfilled through the poet's success in composition. Some scholars attempted to read Coleridge's images from the angle of sexuality, particularly the snake, but I do not find strong evidence of their interpretations.

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