

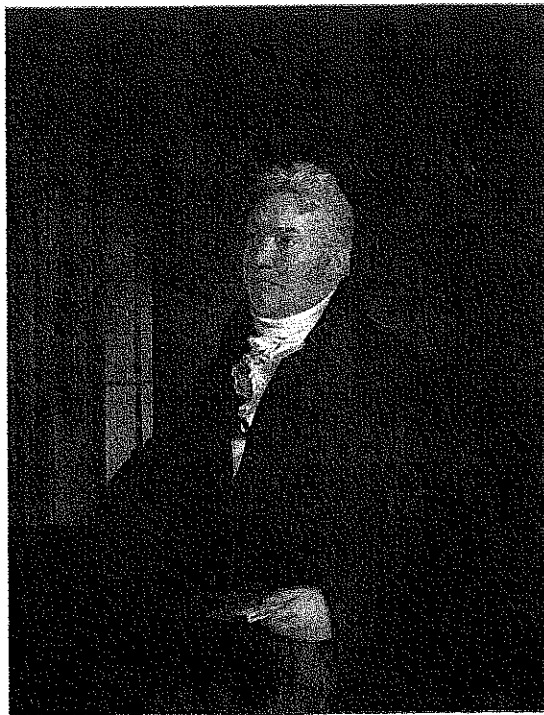
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1772–1834

A remarkable poet and thinker, Samuel Taylor Coleridge is best remembered today for "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan," three poems that deal with demonic and supernatural themes. A consummate craftsman, Coleridge produced musical verse with an exquisite perfection of meter. In addition, no figure was more influential than he in the shift from classic to the Romantic spirit, not solely because of his poetic, critical, and philosophical writings but also because of his extraordinary personal magnetism.

As a schoolboy, Coleridge was precocious, reading the most difficult passages of Virgil for amusement. His delicate health, which plagued him throughout his life, was a serious problem even in his boyhood. Already an excellent scholar when he entered Cambridge, Coleridge did not care for college life. In his third year, in despair over financial difficulties, he fled to London to enlist in the Light Dragoons under the absurd alias Silas Tomkyn Comberback. His brothers found him and with some difficulty secured his discharge, sending him back to Cambridge, though when he left in 1794 he still had no degree. That same year Coleridge met an Oxford student named Robert Southey who was to be his lifelong friend.

In 1795 Coleridge had the extraordinary good fortune to meet William Wordsworth. The two young men had a catalytic effect upon one another, inspiring each other to better work than either had until then done singly. Wordsworth said, "The only wonderful man I ever knew was Coleridge." In 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* appeared, with poems by both Wordsworth and Coleridge, including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." During this time of great creativity, personal and financial concerns caused Coleridge to consider supporting himself as a Unitarian minister, but an annuity from Thomas and Josiah Wedgwood, sons of the founder of the pottery firm, enabled Coleridge to devote his life to letters. In September of 1798, accompanied by the Wordsworths, he went to Germany to study philosophy.



SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, 1814. Washington Allston. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Coleridge was frequently in severe pain from his physical disabilities. Wordsworth noted that in his pain Coleridge would "throw himself down and writhe like a worm upon the ground." Doctors prescribed laudanum, opium dissolved in alcohol, and it is well known that Coleridge composed "Kubla Khan" in 1797 while under the influence of this drug. By 1800 his dosage having been repeatedly increased to cope with rheumatic attacks, Coleridge was addicted, and for more than fifteen years the gifted man lived miserably, able to write only in fits and starts. He moved frequently, living with friends in London, going to Malta, visiting Rome, until in 1816 he moved in with a Dr. Gillman at Highgate, north of London. Though he seldom left his rooms, they became a kind of literary Mecca, with admirers from England and America flocking to listen to the dazzling conversation of "The Sage of Highgate." *Biographia Literaria* (1817) appeared in the early Highgate years. A blend of autobiographical, philosophical, and critical writing, this two-volume work contains a detailed evaluation of Wordsworth's poetry and affirms Coleridge's fundamental belief in the power of the imagination.

Kubla Khan

Almost as well known as this poem are the circumstances of its composition. According to Coleridge he had been reading about the building of a summer palace by the great thirteenth-century Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan, when he fell asleep in his chair as a result of a pain-killing drug he had taken. As he slept, he said, "the images [of this poem] rose up before him as things, . . . without any . . . consciousness of effort." On awakening he began writing down the poem but was interrupted at line 54 by a "person on business from Porlock," a nearby village, and afterwards was unable to remember the rest. The result was a "fragment," he said, "a vision in a dream."

In Xanadu¹ did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. 5
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree,
And here were forests ancient as the hills, 10
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted 15
By woman wailing for her demon lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst 20
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion 25
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

1. Xanadu (zán' ə dōō): an indefinite area of Tartary in Asia.

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war! 30

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device, 35
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer²
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played, 40
Singing of Mount Abora.³
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long, 45
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair! 50
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

2. **dulcimer** [dul' sə mə:]: a musical instrument with metallic wires played with small hammers.

3. **Mount Abora** [ə bōr' ə]: a legendary earthly paradise like Kubla Khan's.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. Trace the progress of Alph, the sacred river. How and in what kind of place does it originate? Through what kind of area does it flow? What kind of course does it follow? What is its final destination? In your answer refer to specific lines in the poem.
2. Describe the pleasure-dome and its setting. Where is the pleasure-dome described as a blend of opposites? How does the pleasure-dome figure in the last stanza of the poem?
3. Inspired by a vision of an Abyssinian damsel, what does the speaker hope to do?
4. In the last lines of the poem, the speaker anticipates a reaction. Why should all beware and avert their eyes?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Imagery.** In lines 1–11 do you find any similarities to a Biblical paradise? Explain. Notice how the mysterious slanting chasm is described in lines 12–16. Does it seem sinister or attractive or both? What curious blend of imagery is apparent here? Do you find overtones of the romantic? the satanic? the erotic? In lines 17–24, in what way does the language suggest the process of birth and creation? Amid this violence and turmoil, what is being “born”? After the sacred river runs past gardens and scenes of nature, it reaches the “caverns measureless to man,” the “sunless sea,” the “lifeless ocean.” What is suggested by these phrases?
2. **Symbol.** Considering that the Alph is a sacred river that runs through nature to a “lifeless ocean,” what might the river symbolize? In what way might the passage of this river represent a kind of panorama of existence?
3. **Structure.** This poem has three parts that could be called the thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis. The first part presents a vision of a paradise. Then follows a sinister and turbulent contrast. The third part introduces another vision and brings the first two visions together, for the poet who could create such a dome “in air” inspires a “holy dread.”

Applying this scheme, where do you think the divisions are in the poem? Where does the antithesis begin? Where does it end? Note that the antithesis returns briefly to the contrasting thesis. What change in meter comes with the beginning of the synthesis? What happens to the metrical pattern in the final ten lines of the poem? What is suggested by the pattern of these lines?

4. **Theme.** This is one of Coleridge’s “mystery poems,” filled with romantic magic, strongly influenced by the irrational and the unconscious. It can give pleasure without being thoroughly “understood” and can be seen to have meaning and coherence, even as a dream can. In what way does this poem deal with human existence itself, with beginnings and endings and the search for paradise? with the magic of poetic creation and the sacred rivers and chasms of the mind?

5. **Sound Devices.** This poem can be read as a kind of “pure poetry”; its musical language and suggestive imagery can be enjoyed for their own sake. Consider line 25. What technique enhances its sounds? How do the words seem to imitate what they describe? Find several other examples of striking sound effects, created by devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, and rhythmic variations.

Developing Vocabulary

Using a Dictionary. The prefix *inter-* comes from the Latin word meaning “between” or “among.” The word *half-intermittent* occurs in line 20 of this poem. Using a dictionary, establish the meaning of this word in relation to its Latin roots. Do the same for these other words, which also combine *inter-* with Latin roots.

interstice	interject	internuncio
interdict	interpellate	interface
intercede	interpolate	intermittent

William Wordsworth

1770-1850

Considered the greatest of the English Romantic poets, William Wordsworth described reality in language so lovely that his poems seem to confer a deeply spiritual beauty on their subjects and through them on their readers and life itself. The sheer beauty of his lines, standing in sharp contrast to the stilted diction of much eighteenth-century poetry, was so striking that Wordsworth seemed to have reinvented poetry. His definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity," although an unconventional idea in its time, now seems to be a self-evident and permanent truth.

Born in the Lake District of northern England, Wordsworth spent much of his boyhood roaming the countryside. His mother died when he was eight, and his father died five years later, circumstances that may have contributed to the aimlessness of Wordsworth's youth and young manhood. Thanks to his uncle, he went to Cambridge, where he took his degree in 1791. He then went on a walking tour of France, and his youthful enthusiasm was fired by the still-idealistic causes of the Revolution.

The next few years were difficult for Wordsworth. He fell in love with Annette Vallon, who bore him a daughter, Caroline, but circumstances prevented their marrying. As time passed he and Annette drifted apart. Racked by guilt, disillusioned by the excesses of the French Revolution, ambivalent about virtually everything ("wearied out with contrarieties"), he was on the verge of emotional collapse.

In 1795 Wordsworth settled at Racedown, Dorsetshire, with his beloved sister Dorothy, who was to be a lifelong confidante and emotional bulwark. In June of that year, he was visited by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had already discerned greatness in the few poems Wordsworth had published. An instant bond was formed, and the Wordsworths moved to Alfoxden to be near Coleridge. There Wordsworth and Coleridge were in almost daily contact for a year. The result was *Lyrical Ballads*



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, 1818. E. R. Haydon.
National Portrait Gallery, London.

(1798), the appearance of which announced a new literary epoch. Coleridge, whose realm was the supernatural, contributed "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," while the more prolific Wordsworth, whose realm was common life, contributed many splendid poems, among them "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." In 1799 the Wordsworths returned to the Lake District, and in 1802 Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson, whom he had known since childhood.

During his final forty years, Wordsworth occasionally wrote a splendid poem when moved by powerful emotion, but he only infrequently recaptured the poetic power of his earlier years. Yet even as he wrote less, his fame grew. A new generation, raised on the Romantic taste Wordsworth had helped to create, recognized the genius of works such as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," and it was considered entirely fitting when he was appointed poet laureate upon the death of Robert Southey in 1843. After a short illness, Wordsworth died on April 23, 1850.

I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, 5
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay: 10
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay, 15
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood, 20
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. What is the immediate effect upon the speaker of seeing the daffodils?
2. What is the unexpected effect of the experience?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Meter and Rhyme Scheme.** Considering both the kind and the number of feet in each line of this poem,

identify the metrical pattern. Then chart the rhyme scheme. Is it the same for each stanza?

In "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth acknowledges the value of meter in ordering ideas and in heightening the pleasure of reading poetry, as long as the meter does not interfere with passion. Comment on the way that this poem exemplifies Wordsworth's critical theory regarding meter.

2. **Personification.** In "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth states, "... personifications are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. . . . They are a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such." Where is personification used in this poem? What qualities does it emphasize in the things being described? Is the personification here "prompted by passion" and thus a justifiable device in the context of the poem? Explain.

3. **Diction.** The opening simile compares the lonely speaker to a floating cloud. Does this suggest a painful kind of loneliness? What words in lines 3 and 4 present an alternative to lonely isolation? What other words in the poem carry forward the idea of happy commingling? What words pick up the idea of loneliness?

What does the phrase "bliss of solitude" suggest about being alone?

4. **Imagery.** Two kinds of images predominate in this poem: images suggesting movement and those suggesting light. Identify these images. What is their effect upon the mood of the poem?

Developing Vocabulary

Word Origins. The speaker, initially lonely, discovers "jocund company." Look up the meaning of *jocund* in a dictionary. What other words in the third stanza convey a similar meaning? What is the root origin of *jocund*? Can you find other words that derive either from the same root or from another, closely related root?

She Was a Phantom of Delight

She¹ was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament;
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair; 5
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and waylay. 10

1. **She:** Mary Hutchinson, Wordsworth's wife.

The World Is Too Much with Us

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!¹
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon; 5
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are upgathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; 10
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton² blow his wreathèd horn.

1. **boon**: a favor requested.

2. **Proteus** (prō' tē əs) . . . **Triton** (trīt' n): sea gods in Greek mythology.

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen¹
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,²
Have forfeited their ancient English dower 5
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again,
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea: 10
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

1. **fen**: a bog.

2. **hall and bower**: The hall and bower were the main rooms of large Anglo-Saxon houses.

*It Is a Beauteous Evening,
Calm and Free*

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea: 5
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear Child!¹ dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought, 10
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom² all the year;
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

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1. **Dear Child:** Wordsworth's daughter Caroline.
 2. **in Abraham's bosom:** in the presence of God.



MORTLAKE TERRACE, 1826. J. M. W. Turner.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE,
SEPTEMBER 3, 1802

1. What is the emotional effect of the scene on the speaker? Where does the poem indicate this?
2. In what way does the speaker establish a relationship between a city scene and the beauty of nature?
3. Explain the phrase "that mighty heart" in line 14. What do the exclamations in this and the preceding line suggest to the reader?

THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

4. Do *world* and *nature* mean the same thing in this poem, or different things? How could the world be "too much with us"?
5. Why would the speaker rather be a pagan? What qualities does the speaker seem to attach to the word *pagan*?

LONDON, 1802

6. According to the speaker what is wrong with England in 1802?
7. Notice after the semicolon in line 13, the words "and yet." What qualities of Milton are being contrasted in the sestet of the sonnet?

IT IS A BEAUTEOUS EVENING, CALM AND FREE

8. Notice that the octave of this sonnet is concerned with the natural scene, and the sestet is concerned with the child. What do both parts have in common?
9. How is the speaker's response to the experience different from the child's?
10. In lines 6-8 what sound is being described?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Sonnet.** Is "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" a Petrarchan (Italian) or a Shakespearean (English) sonnet? In "The World Is Too Much with Us," how does the octave-sestet arrangement coincide with the poem's ideas? What kind of sonnet is "London, 1802"? Does its form reflect its content?

These sonnets do not end with a couplet as do many Elizabethan sonnets. Why might Wordsworth have avoided using the closing couplet?

2. **Personification.** Where in "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" do you find personification? How does it enhance the description of the scene? What quality does it seem to introduce?

3. **Tone.** Part of the effect of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" lies in the tone that it achieves. How would you characterize that tone, and what words or passages contribute to it? Comment on the similarities in tone among all four sonnets. In which sonnets does the tone deviate most markedly from that of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge"? What might account for this difference in tone?

4. **Theme.** In "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Wordsworth says that we come into this world from God, "trailing clouds of glory," and that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy." Explain how this idea about the nature of childhood is echoed in "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free."

To Wordsworth, Milton embodies the qualities of the ideal poet. What are these qualities, as implied in "London, 1802"? What is the relationship between the poet and society? between the poet and ordinary human beings?

5. **Imagery.** Analyze the imagery of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" in terms of the qualities of light, sound, and movement. What words and phrases emphasize calm or quiet? How does the imagery contribute to the overall mood of the scene?

In "The World Is Too Much with Us," the speaker would rather be "suckled in a creed outworn" than be out of tune with nature. How does the poem's imagery identify nature as the life force, a source of sustenance and nurturing?

In "London, 1802," note the similes in lines 9-11. What qualities in Milton do they suggest? Is there any similarity between the qualities associated with the sea in this sonnet and in "The World Is Too Much with Us"?

"It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free," like "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," emphasizes the qualities of calm and quiet and associates energy or movement with water. What qualities does Wordsworth associate with the sea in both "The World Is Too Much with Us" and "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free"? In the latter sonnet, point out how the use of religious imagery enhances the poem's theme.

6. **Allusion.** In "The World Is Too Much with Us," what is the effect of alluding to the ancient Greek gods Proteus and Triton? How does this reinforce the pattern of imagery that contrasts "the world" with nature and the sea?

7. **Metonymy.** A figure of speech in which an associated word is substituted for a literal meaning is metonymy. In *Genesis*, when God tells Adam, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread," sweat stands for "hard labor." Similarly, *crown* can mean "the king." In "London, 1802," where do you find metonymy? What are the literal meanings of these metonyms?

Developing Vocabulary

Word Origins. The derivation and history of a word strongly affect its connotations, which are always important in poetry. You can find these derivations, or etymologies, in a college or desk dictionary, usually placed inside square brackets before or after the definition.

The following five words, used in these sonnets, have been in the English language a long time and have interesting derivations.

1. **Steep.** After deciding on its part of speech in "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," look up the derivation and meaning of *steep*. How does it function as a metaphor in this poem?

2. **Boon** (as a noun). Using a dictionary, find the

language from which it is derived and when and where that language was spoken.

3. **Lea.** Find its meaning and derivation. Does your dictionary also record its past association with a certain Latin root?

4. **Fen.** Use a dictionary to find its derivation and the other languages to which its root is related.

5. **Brood** (as a verb). Note its use in "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free." How are its connotations related to its derivation?

Developing Writing Skills

See Handbook: How To Write About Literature, page 938, Lessons 1-7. <<

Using Comparisons and Contrasts. Choose two or more of these sonnets and in several paragraphs compare and contrast them in terms of theme, imagery, structure, and other elements. For example, how do "The World Is Too Much with Us" and "London, 1802" both express some kind of dissatisfaction and suggest an alternative? How do the views of London contrast in "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" and "London, 1802"? What are the similarities and differences in imagery between "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" and "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free"? Are any patterns of imagery or diction apparent in several of these poems?