

## A Political Reading of S. T. Coleridge's *The Raven*

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### Abstract:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) is famous as the English poet who wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and *Kubla Khan* (1816) but today is almost forgotten as one of the greatest political thinkers of his time. His political orientation can be traced in many of his poems, political pamphlets and journalistic writings. Many of his poems such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* are studied from a political point of view but the contribution of Coleridge's political beliefs to the poem *The Raven* has not been studied. Although a few studies have been done on this poem, it has been neglected to a great extent by scholars. This study tends to explore the symbolism manifested in *The Raven* in order to illustrate the political dimensions implicit in this poem. Certainly 'The Raven' has none of the political allusions and this has led most critics to concur that the poem exhibits a total lack of politics. Yet given the circumstances which gave rise to 'The Raven' as a political poem, is the very absence of political content which is itself political.

**Key Words:** Samuel Taylor Coleridge; *The Raven*; Political Poetry; Symbolism

## **1. Introduction**

Poets are under the influence of political events and controversies like any other class of people. They work in language, the medium in which political concepts and demands are formulated, contested, and negotiated. The period between 1780 and 1830, during which the great Romantic poets came to maturity and produced their most important works, was such a period, as they were all aware. Coleridge and Southey were both active as political journalists, and Coleridge produced a number of significant works of political theory.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on 21 October 1772. The youngest of 14 children, he was educated after his father's death and excelled in classics. He attended Christ's Hospital and Jesus College. While attending college, he befriended two other Romanticists, Charles Lamb and Robert Southey, the latter causing him to eventually drop out of college and pursue both poetic and political ambitions. Although Coleridge often wrote poetry, his talent did not manifest until after 1794, when he transitioned into what would later be described as Romantic poetry. During this time, he worked with Southey on developing an ideal political government called Pantisocracy. Coleridge continued with his ideas of political reform and democracy. Eventually, he gave up his political ambitions and focused on his poetic career.

S. T. Coleridge was a supporter of the French Revolution and Parliamentary reform and opponent of the repressive measures of the government of William Pitt. Throughout his life, Coleridge was a political activist. The philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill ranked Coleridge's influence as a political thinker as equal to that of the famous social reformer, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). He called them "the two great seminal minds of England in their age". From his student days as an undergraduate at Cambridge, Coleridge participated in agitation in support of his hero, William Fend, and in later years, criticized the pervasion of materialist thinking and

commercial ethics. Reports of his college life suggest that he was absorbing not only Greek texts but English political pamphlets at that interesting moment. He was active in defense of William Frend, a Unitarian and Fellow of Jesus College, who was expelled for publishing a pamphlet advocating Peace and Union (1793). It was probably Frend who converted Coleridge to Unitarianism, a group of Christians who wished to return to the doctrinal purity of the early Church; they believed that many of the beliefs of the established Church were corruptions. This episode marks the beginning of a convergence between politics and poetry in Coleridge's career.

Through all aspects of life, Coleridge was a deeply political man. His writings reveal him as someone who closely followed the contemporary political scene as it unfolded during one of the most turbulent and exciting periods in the nation's history. He was a man who steeped in the leading ideas of European political philosophy. During this time, Coleridge began to raise money through lectures on politics. His first lecture was called "*A Moral and Political Lecture*", in which he attacked the British government and William Pitt. The other two lectures were reworked to form a pamphlet entitled "*Conciones ad Populum*". In the pamphlet, Coleridge uses the image of the winter 1794 famine in asking for political changes. Coleridge continued to lecture during the year, giving one on the topic of abolishing the slave trade and one in opposition to the Gagging Acts. Politics was not the only topic Coleridge lectured on; he also gave "*Six Lectures on Revealed Religion*" that combined Unitarian religion and political ideas together.

Coleridge gave political lectures, essays and editorials for the press, published journals full of political comments, and produced three substantial political treatises. As a young man, he published sonnets on key political figures of the time, such as Burke, Pitt, Priestley and William Godwin and a number of poems about his response to the French Revolution. In his later life it is claimed that he left supporting the radical politics and religion, becoming in the years of post-war reaction, a

supporter of the established Church and State. Coleridge with his fellow poets William Wordsworth and Robert Southey constituted the 'Lake School' of poets, men who had turned their backs on radical and reformist youth, retreating to the Lake District and replacing ideas of political renewal with visions of natural sublimity.

Coleridge believed that the political improvement would occur, through the efficacy of a small group of enlightened thinkers. He upheld the freedom of the press and his political opinions were always informed by his religious beliefs. After Cambridge, Coleridge with his radical fellow Robert Southey devised a scheme for emigration to America to find a Utopian colony in Pensilvaniya. The system of 'Pantisocracy' was organized on the principle of the equal rule of all and involved the communal ownership of property. Coleridge believed that property is power and equal property was equal power. Clearly the two poets had not fully thought out the implications of what they were doing, and the scheme ended in failure.

In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge drew attention to his isolation from the reformist movements of the time, highlighting not his attacks on the government but, instead, his critique of modern patriotism. Coleridge attempted to ground his political beliefs on a religious basis and his opinions were certainly idiosyncratic, yet these things would not isolate him within the various groupings of reformers and radicals of the 1790s. Coleridge took his political bearings from a different radical tradition and found the examples of Godwin and Paine to be troubling. In the *Watchman* (1796) Coleridge accused the followers of Godwin of considering 'filial affection folly, gratitude a crime, marriage injustice, and the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes right and wise'. He was concerned not only to attack the war with France and to argue for political reform, but also to place his dissent within a tradition of religious radical thought. Although many of his concerns remained constant Coleridge had altered his view on a number of issues by 1805. Most importantly

he had abandoned his Unitarian dissent, and the established Church was to play a more important role in his thinking from then on.

Coleridge categorizes the 'Friends of Liberty' into four classes: Republicans or Aristocrats, thoughtless extremists motivated by hate, propertied middle-class reformers, and the glorious band' of 'thinking and disinterested patriots'. Coleridge praises a fourth class of reformers, the 'small but glorious band' of 'thinking and disinterested Patriots' who are among the Poor teaching them their rights and making them susceptible of their duties. Coleridge also distinguished between three types of government; that founded on fear, on expediency and on pure Reason. Dismissing government by fear as applicable to beasts not men, and government by expediency as oblivious to our human nature, Coleridge proceeds to develop a critique of those systems founded on an appeal to Reason. So, as a political thinker, and as a Christian apologist, Coleridge proved an inspiration to the generation after his own.

## **2. A Political Poem: *The Raven***

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's political poems command respect because of their intelligence, their pointedness and their recognition of other claims. They need some knowledge of political events of the time, but time has proved them right. While Coleridge was working on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he produced another poem named *The Raven* in a sharper and more cynical tone. S. T. Coleridge's *The Raven* was published in 1798. Its subtitle *A Christmas Tale, Told by a Schoolboy to his Little Brothers and Sisters* suggests innocence and something appropriate to the Christmas season. This poem tells the story of a raven, who flies far and gathers much knowledge. On his return to his favorite tree he sets up a house with a female raven but one day a woodman chops the tree down killing the raven's wife and chicks. The harmonious life of the birds is destroyed by the

woodman. The wood is used as timbers for the building of a ship. When the ship is launched it sinks in an uncanny storm and the raven is avenged. As the raven flies back to land, he meets death and thanks him for the storm and the satisfaction of revenge. Besides being a kind of morality tale in verse, the poem uses the aspects of the raven-symbol having to do with politics.

Poets of all times have frequently turned to birds as poetic voices, among them John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, Walt Whitman's *The Dalliance of Eagles*, William Wordsworth's *To a Skylark* and Emily Dickinson's *A Bird Came down the Walk*. Some of the most famous birds encountered in Anglo-American poetry are "the raven" and "the albatross". In this research paper, a political-reading of Coleridge's poem *The Raven* is attempted. Before turning to Coleridge's poem, there will be an introduction to the bird Raven. His voice is unpleasant – a rasping, croaking sound – which is unusual for a bird and does not endear it to humanity. Throughout history it has come to symbolize different things to different people and their literatures. Raven is not a loved bird; its presence is seen as a bad omen being. No one is happy to see a raven, but it plays its part in our world of symbolism and mythology. It is considered one of the most intelligent of birds. Thus, it has learned patience, to be watchful and thoughtful, and to gather knowledge from the land, so as to benefit itself in the battle for life. The symbolic meaning of the raven is a mixture of natural and conventional symbol, depending on the culture which has adopted it. There are numerous conventional symbolisms of the raven. For example, the raven symbolizes the grim fate of death. The black coloration has an association with evil. It is Knowledge gatherer and bringer of light. The raven, a conventional sign of something rather negative or pessimistic, is here used as a symbol of tragic anticipation.

Coleridge grounded his libertarianism and communism on the romantic sentiment and pity for the oppressed. By early 1796, national and international politics had secured a place next below the

throne of religion in Coleridge's mind. His poems do not have a dictionary of political catchwords common to verse and prose instead he favored the more politically neutral words over the emotional ones, for example, freedom over liberty. *The Raven* is rarely accorded with aesthetic scrutiny. By placing it in the literary and historical context, one can illustrate how Coleridge's response to political events supplies the world created by his poem with its syntax and form.

Some proposed interpretations read it in political terms apart from being a moral poem. By 1798 Coleridge had given up any hope of improvement by political action. S. T. Coleridge's *The Raven* was written against the background of the collapse of the poet's hopes for the improvement of mankind by political action and the ultimate failure of the French Revolution. As a common thread through the works of Coleridge, there is the theme of politics in *The Raven* which is pictured via symbolic devices. The concept of the symbol was vitally important to Coleridge throughout his career as a poet, critic and professional man of letters. Relating the poem to the social context of the time, the raven, the woodman, the oak tree and other symbols show Coleridge's disappointment and fear of the French Revolution of 1789. However, the time and circumstances of writing the poem is also political as it was published in 1798, the time of the French Revolution. This research tends to illustrate how political symbols such as the raven, the woodman, the oak tree and etc. work in Coleridge's poetry because Coleridge loved experiments with words, symbols and metaphors. Generally, in this poem, Coleridge wishes that one day virtue, joy, life and love win against vice, despair, hatred and death.

In the early years of Coleridge's political activity, he was optimistic about the improvement of society by the rising of the French Revolution. The situation offered a chance for regeneration. That is why so much hope was present during the first stage of the Revolution and that is why Coleridge welcomed the news from revolutionary France at first. But as the time passed he became more and more disappointed with the revolution because it made the condition worse than before by its

destructive presence. So, as a parallel situation, in the beginning of *The Raven* Coleridge declares his optimism:

He picked up the acorn and buried it straight

By the side of a river both deep and great.

Where then did the Raven Go?

He went high and low,

Over hill, over dale, did the black Raven go.

Many Autumns, many Springs

Travelled he with wandering wings:

Many summers, many Winters--

I can't tell half his adventures.

At length he came back, and with him a She

And the acorn was grown to a tall oak tree.

They built them a nest in the topmost bough,

And young ones they had, and were happy enow. (Coleridge, *The Raven*)

But later his expression is pained and bewildered; as we have:

But soon came a Woodman in leathern guise,

His brow, like a pent-house, hung over his eyes.

He'd an axe in his hand, not a word he spoke,

But with many a hem! and a sturdy stroke,

At length he brought down the poor Raven's own oak.

His young ones were killed; for they could not depart,

And their mother did die of a broken heart.(Coleridge, *The Raven*)

The poem is a reaction to the public mismanagement of affairs in which the hero of it observes with malignant delight how the vices of the governing clique lead to their own destruction. In *The Raven*, the ship was caught in a storm. The storm symbolically reflects the turmoil of the changes in the society at the end of the eighteenth century:

The ship it was launch'd; but in sight of the land,  
A tempest arose which no ship could withstand.  
It bulg'd on a rock, and the waves rush'd in fast—  
The auld Raven flew round and round, and caw'd to the blast.(Coleridge, *The Raven*)

The old faith, symbolized by the oak tree, is undermined, and no certainty remains, everything seems to be uprooted. The felling of the oak tree is also seen as the destruction brought about by the French Revolution:

But with many a hem! and a sturdy stroke,  
At length he brought down the poor Raven's own oak (*The Raven*)

The raven is identified with the melancholy Burke prophesying the revolution's effects. The characters in Coleridge's *The Raven* and the representatives of the French revolution share a primary noble intention, but the circumstances and selfish human factors do not allow either of them to carry out their noble intentions as they wished. The desire for freedom was corrupted for selfish goals in France. So, the portrayal of these ideas by implication makes them more striking. The ideas of guilt and restoration are implicit in *The Raven* which were developed by Coleridge and grew out of his observation of the career of the French Revolution. The woodman, cutting the oak tree, committed a crime, which later caused his death in the poem; and the return of the raven to the oak tree symbolizes the idea of the restoration.

However, the French Revolution is not present in the poem, but it throws its great shadow across it. At first, Coleridge appears to be a supporter of the Revolution and an upholder of dissenting views of society and religion. He believes that humanity can be redeemed by political actions. On the contrary, the freedom of the raven living on the oak tree is taken away from it by the woodman; the enthusiasm changed into contempt and disillusion. There was much disappointment because of the violence used. In France, the violence peaked in the latter stages of the Revolution, and, in the case of the raven, the violence found its greatest horror at the point of felling the oak tree. Not violence and blood but peaceful life should have been the result of the Revolution. Instead, a dark and almost deathly period in French history set in.

There is anew a parallel in *The Raven*. The bird lost everything it had yearned for and loved so much, and it has no joy anymore. Its love is gone and it only waits for death to end its life:

He heard the last shriek of the perishing souls

See! see! o'er the topmast the mad water rolls!

Right glad was the Raven, and off he went fleet,

And Death riding home on a cloud he did meet,

And he thank'd him again and again for this treat:

They had taken his all, and REVENGE IT WAS SWEET!(*The Raven*)

### **3. Conclusion**

There was a combination of politics and poetry in the Romantic period due to the rise of the French Revolution in 1789. Consequently, poets were under the influence of the political events of the time and reacted to them by writing the politically symbolic poetry. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the romantic poets who inserted the political concepts and symbols into some of his

poems. Coleridge's mind was highly engaged with politics and religion. He participated in many of the political activities of his time during which he declared his support of the French Revolution and parliamentary reform. But later, being disappointed with the improvement of the society by the revolution, he turned to conservatism and engaged himself with the romantic aspects of poetry.

After being expelled from college as a consequence of writing a political pamphlet, Coleridge started delivering many political lectures and writing political pamphlets. His political lectures attacked the British government and its war against France, yet also criticized the violence of the French Revolution. He advocated the moral and political education of the poor and working classes in order to prepare them for full participation in the political process. He called for parliamentary reform, freedom of speech, and honesty in political debate, criticizing the abuse of language perpetrated by his "aristocratic" opponents, who rely on slogans and catchwords to exercise a mechanical power over the minds of the common people. He argued that a prior moral revolution is vital if there is to be a successful political revolution. The French Republicans, however, had attempted to proceed with political change without first enlightening the people.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is commonly known for his famous works namely *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christable* and *Kubla Khan*. His poems such as *The Rime of the ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan*, and *Fears in Solitude* have been studied from a political point of view. He also has written another poem named *The Raven* which is rarely read by his followers. Few studies have been done on this poem and it has not been studied from political aspects although it can be grouped with his other political poems. While Coleridge was writing *The Rime of the ancient Mariner*, he produced *The Raven* as an illustration of his disappointment with the French Revolution. The theme of politics is not directly stated in the poem; it is rather implied by his manifestation of symbols. Relating the poem to the social and political context of the time of writing the poem, one can

understand how the raven, the oak tree, the storm and the woodsman work as political symbols throughout the poem. Actually, the poet sympathizes with the oppressed whose lives are destroyed by the tyrants during the revolution; as the raven, his mate and chicks symbolize the oppressed families who have no power against the tyranny of the existing society and government, the falling of the oak tree is the symbol of the destruction brought about by the revolution and the storm being the chaotic and cruel environment of 1789.

So, with these considerations, Coleridge's *The Raven* can be considered as a political poem as well as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*. However, Coleridge did not agree with the scholars analyzing his poems from a political aspect; he preferred the aesthetic and romantic values of his poems to their political values. But it is notable that the political aspects of his poems cannot be denied because he was highly engaged with the political activities of his time and reacted to them in his poetry.

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