
Treatment of Supernatural in the Poetry of S.T. Coleridge

Ishtiyaq Ahmad

Kulgam, Jammu and Kashmir

Paper Received on 19-05-2023, Accepted on 29-06-2023,
Published on 30-06-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.247

Abstract

Coleridge has been regarded as one of the greatest romantic poets of England. He belonged to the first generation poets of the Romantic Movement and contributed with some prized writings to the collection of "Lyrical Ballads" along with William Wordsworth. Both of them played a significant and dominant role to adorn nature and to give it an everlasting meaning by making it an indispensable entity in their poetry. But the difference in their approach to nature lies in this dictum, that Wordsworth choose day to day incidents and underlined the serene aspect of nature, Coleridge underlined the tragic ,sublime and supernatural aspect of nature to benefit and beautify his art of poetry. Coleridge stands out prominently in the handling of supernatural vision in his poetry. His theme embraces the world of mystery and the atmosphere created is surcharged with suspense and disbelief. This article involves my opinion about use of supernaturalism in the poetry of Coleridge.

Keywords: Romantic, Supernatural, lyrical Ballads, nature.

Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was a co-founder of Romanticism in English literature. He has been considered as the 'most complete representative' of the English Romantic poetry of the early 19th century. His poetry reflects the culmination of romanticism in its purest form. Coleridge's greatest artistic strengths as a romantic poet are on display in his treatment of supernatural, medievalism, love of music, fascination for the remote, symbolism, love of nature, and the dream quality of his poetry.

Coleridge is essentially a supernatural poet. Supernaturalism is something that is above and beyond the natural and logical, a belief in an otherworldly realm or reality which cannot be directly explained by known laws and observations. The three constituents of supernaturalism are- dream, suggestiveness and vision. It is dream like quality of Coleridge's supernatural that makes "suspension of disbelief possible". Walter Horatio Pater writes "it is the delicacy, the dreamy grace in the presentation of the marvelous which makes Coleridge's work so remarkable.

The two palpable intruders from a spiritual world in almost all ghost literature, in Scott and Shakespeare even, have a kind

of coarseness and crudeness. Coleridge's power is the very fineness with which, as with some ghostly finger, he brings home to our innermost sense in his inventions, daring as they are". Coleridge use of supernaturalism is both convincing and exciting. He used it as a part of wider area of human experience. The presentation of supernaturalism seems natural. He succeeds in creating an enchanted atmosphere full of realism and this realism creates a "willing suspension of disbelief" among the readers. Coleridge's supernaturalism is supreme among all Romantic poets. In fact, he made an epoch of poetry of supernaturalism. In the words of H .D. Trail "Coleridge's imagination seems to acquire poetic distinction in the region of the fantastic and the supernatural".

Before Coleridge the Gothic romancers of the 18th century, Ann Radcliff, Horace Walpole, Monk Lewis and Beckford made attempts in handling the supernatural elements. They popularized a special kind of novel called Gothic Romance. These Romances were set in the middle ages. Their scenes were laid in haunted castles and decayed buildings. They aimed at creating the atmosphere of awe and terror in the minds of readers by depicting the scenes of darkness and night, by showing the dominance of supernatural powers over human lives and by including incredible sense of magic and mystery. Their handling of supernaturalism was grim, horrible and blood curdling. However, Coleridge's treatment of supernatural is realistic and refined. In fact, Coleridge creates an

atmosphere of mystery and fear without showing anything horrible or dreadful. Coleridge linked the supernatural phenomenon with the human psychology, turning his attention more on the psychic representation of the supernatural incidents than to their gruesome representation by piling horrible details as was done by the Gothic romantic writers. Coleridge wrote in 'Biographia Literaria', "It was agreed that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural or at least romantic, yet so as to transform from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that 'willing suspension of disbelief' for the moment which constitutes poetic truth"

Coleridge's poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel" are the precious assets of the English Literature in their presentation of supernatural elements. These poetical works testify to his power to represent the mystic world of supernatural in the most natural way and to create an atmosphere of wonder and astonishment.

Kubla Khan is essentially a dream poem recounting in poetic form what he saw in a vision. Here everything is depicted in a natural way, yet the poem creates an atmosphere of mystery and astonishment. Coleridge's takes the readers out of the world of everyday life into a world of wonder and romance as shown in the

following lines of the poem where he describes the 'Alph' river:

“Where Alph, the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.”
(Lines: 3-5)

Coleridge's treatment of supernatural is perfect and complete. His supernaturalism is highly suggestive. He blends together the natural and the supernatural so that the probable and the improbable interfuse. In the following lines of "Kubla Khan" the mystic suggestiveness and the sensation of fear and suspense remain here all through operative:

“A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath the waning moon was
haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!”
(Lines: 14-16)

The greatness of S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" lies mainly in the artistic technique by which supernaturalism has been made believable and convincing. There are number of impossible, incredible and fantastic situations in the poem. The poem makes reference to several supernatural incidents like the fascinating power in the mariner's gaze, the sudden appearance of the mysterious skeleton ship, the spectre-woman and her mate, the coming back of life to dead crew and the polar spirits talking to each other etc. In this poem strangeness is created by a hundred delicate touches and subtle

hints, made convincing to the reader by the profound psychological might of the poet. "The mystery, the strangeness, the weirdness of the supernatural cast a peculiar spell on the dreamy imagination of the Coleridge; his vision of unseen world..Behind and beyond the seen world of nature and reality, is the unseen world of the supernatural, and this unseen world, peopled with mysterious beings and powers was what Coleridge sought to make real by the wonder-working power of his imagination". The following lines of the poem create an atmosphere of mystery and indefiniteness:

“Water, water, everywhere
And all the boards did sink
water, water, everywhere
Not any drop to drink.”
(Lines: 117-120)

Coleridge's poetry marks an epoch in the poetry of supernatural. The appearance of the spectre ship is a supernatural event. The ship contains two supernatural figures. One is 'Death' and the other is 'Life in Death'. Here the poet describes the uncanny fear in the minds of the readers by throwing light on the physical appearance of 'Life in Death' in the following manner:

“Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her looks were yellow as gold;
Her skin was as white as leprosy
The night-mare Life-in-Death was she
Who thickens man's blood with cold.”
(Lines: 188-192)

In "Ancient Mariner" the strangeness is created by the hundred delicate touches

and hints that influence the psychological setup of a reader. Coleridge's art reaches to perfection when we notice unseen discussed in visible from acting on our senses and actions as in these lines of the poem:

“And now the Storm-Blast came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
and chased us south along.”
(Lines: 44-48)

In “Christabel” one of the methods that Coleridge employs to make the supernatural convincingly real is to transform a simple natural object into a sort of supernatural phenomenon. The ‘full moon’ that looks small and dull, ‘the lingering of the winter spring’, ‘the sudden blaze coming out from the dying brands’ and ‘the angry moan made by the sleeping bitch at the approach of Geraldine’ –in each of these cases a natural object has been transformed into a sort of supernatural phenomenon as portrayed in these lines below:

“The moon is behind , and at the full;
And yet she looks both small and dull.
The night is chill, the cloud is gray:
‘Tis a month before the month of may,
And the spring comes slowly up this way.”
(Lines: 18-22)

Conclusion

How to cite this article?

Ishtiyaq Ahmad

“Treatment of Supernatural in the Poetry of S.T. Coleridge”
Research Journal Of English (RJOE)8(2), PP:258-261, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.2.261

Coleridge produces a sense of wonder and strangeness in his poetry and fulfills the condition of the Romanticism given by Walter Pater that “Romanticism denotes addition of strangeness to beauty.” Coleridge was a pioneer in making the supernatural psychological phenomena. Coleridge's greatness lies in the fact that he does not describe things, but suggests them, enabling the reader to ponder over it and to come to conclusion. This quality makes him unique and great.

References:

- Coleridge and Wordsworth. 1970. The Poetry of Growth. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- Abrahams. M.H.(1953) Romantic theory and The Critical Tradition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [Http://www.englishliterature.com/2022/09/supernatural-elements-in-coleridge-poetry](http://www.englishliterature.com/2022/09/supernatural-elements-in-coleridge-poetry).
- Coleridge .S.T (1817) Biographia Literaria. Retrieved August 28, 2018 from skoula.net/letteratura-inglese-1700/role-imagination.html.
- <http://eliffnotes.com/tag/Coleridges-treatment-of-the-supernatural/>.
- <http://www.literary-articles.com/2010/02/use-of-supernatural-elements-in.html>