

Winter 1-15-1970

Tolkien and Coleridge

Clyde S. Kilby

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien_journal



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kilby, Clyde S. (1970) "Tolkien and Coleridge," *Tolkien Journal*. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien_journal/vol4/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tolkien Journal by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



Tolkien and Coleridge

Abstract

Finds similarities in both authors' love of philology, ability to tell a spell-binding story, and the long torment of the Mariner and Frodo, as well as an essentially Catholic orientation and a regard for the numinous nature of life. (The author does not posit any influence on Tolkien by Coleridge but simply notes similarities.)

Additional Keywords

Coleridge, Samuel Tyler. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings



Tolkien and Coleridge

by Clyde S. Kilby

Any literary work in no small way reflects somehow all literary works, but sometimes two works are so alike that the matter is worth looking into. This I think is true of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" and J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings.

My attention to their similarity was first caught by their confessed experimental ground. Tolkien says that his story grew out of his philological interests and was made "rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse."¹ The plan of Coleridge and Wordsworth for their Lyrical Ballads is well known, Coleridge's part being to try to create supernatural characters but portray them with such truth that the reader would accept them as real. But in both Tolkien and Coleridge the matter goes much deeper. It plunges downward toward the mystery of words and of meaning. Tolkien's remark that the Rings was largely an effort in "linguistic aesthetic" may at first sound like a sapless plant but it is not. From early childhood philology had been as exciting to him as adventure stories to others. The philology had indeed been adventure, the touchstone to the realms of gold. Philology continued his lifelong professional interest but he was sensible enough to retain its parturient rather than turn it into a dull academic affair.

Coleridge's lifelong passion for the vortical quality of language is also evident. He talks of bringing out "some horribly learned book, full of manuscript quotations from Laplandish and Patagonian authors, possibly, on the striking re-

semblance of the Sweogothian and Sanscrit languages, and so on!"² Humphrey House alludes to Coleridge's remark that a look at the moon caused him "rather to be seeking, as it were asking, a symbolical language for something within me that, already and forever exists, than observing any thing new."³ For Tolkien the discovery of the Welsh language was a deeply emotional affair. "I heard it coming out of the West. It struck at me in the names on coal-trucks; and drawing nearer, it flickered past on station-signs, a flash of strange spelling and a hint of a language old and yet alive; even in an adeiladwyd 1887, ill-cut on a stone-slab, it pierced my linguistic heart."⁴

That Coleridge's basic experience of words was essentially philological is evidenced by his lifelong passion for etymologies and the number of fanciful ones he made up as well as his tendency to invent words, such as apheterize, vaccimulgence, and ultra-crepidated, and his production of a poem called "The Nose, An Odaic Rhapsody." If that title suggests that Coleridge's attitude toward words was more whimsical than Tolkien's, one needs only to remember The Adventures of Tom Bombadil with its Fastitocalon, its Mewlips, its Princess Mee, and "the fat cat on the mat."

John Livingston Lowes was the horticulturalist who showed how the overstocked Coleridgian seedbed matured into a great garden of beauty and terror by some proto-Mendelian process not likely ever to be really understood. It was words from Purchase His Pilgrimage which grew up by a process no less

miraculous than nature's own into "Kubla Khan." Lowes tells us concerning that poem and "The Ancient Mariner" that by following Coleridge's divagations we shall come in contact with

alligators and albatrosses and auroras and Antichthones; with biscuit-worms, bubbles of ice, bassoons, and breezes; with candles, and Cain, and the Corpo Santo; Dioclesian, a King of Syria, and the daemons of the elements; earthquakes, and the Euphrates; frost-needles, and fog-smoke, and phosphorescent light; gooseberries, and the Gordonia lasianthus; haloes and hurricanes; lightnings and Laplanders; meteors, and the Old Man of the Mountain, and stars behind the moon; nightmares, and the sources of the Nile; footless birds of Paradise, and the observatory at Pekin; swoons, and spectres, and slimy seas; wefts, and water-snakes, and the Wandering Jew.⁵

Though Tolkien must still wait for his Lowes before we shall learn how words and images flowered into scenes like Rivendell and characters like Galadriel, Bilbo's remark at the end of the *Rings* suggests a similar originating richness. The One Ring, says he, managed to get itself mixed up with many other things: "Aragorn's affairs, and the White Council, and Gondor, and the Horsemen, and Southrons, and oliphaunts...and caves and towers and golden trees, and goodness knows what besides."⁶ For both Coleridge and Tolkien the world is composed of "a number of things" and all capable of setting the creative nature to work.

It is this originating depth of the "Mariner" and the *Rings* that appears to be the chief element in the profundity of impact of the two pieces. The wedding guest in the poem heard and saw signs of the wedding party but was transfixed to his stone seat by the story the old man poured out. Many readers of Tolkien have felt a similar hypnotic hold upon their attention. One reader wrote that "from the moment I took the first volume from the shelf to the time when the last page was finished, I reluctantly stirred only to eat." "It is detrimental to people's health," he facetiously added, "to publish such books." Apparently he would not have made to to a wedding party either. A friend told me that two surgeons in New York City had been so completely caught by the "glittering eye" of Tolkien they were letting their patients languish until the story was completed. In England I saw ten and eleven-year-old youngsters do a dramatization of the *Rings* with such intensity and obvious belief in its reality that their audience was spellbound.

A mysterious recurring torture forces the Mariner to repeat his story on occasions. Though not with the same result, Frodo suffers a similar recurring burden growing out of his long and momentous journey. The Mariner alone on the becalmed sea and feeling the curse in the dead men's eyes was like Frodo at the bottom of Mount Doom: "No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left me. I am naked in the dark...and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire" (III, 215). And later, as with the Mariner, when danger no longer threatened, Frodo said, "I am wounded with knife, string, and tooth, and a long burden," (III, 238) a burden which never left him entirely as long as he was in Middle Earth and at times was as stark as that of the Mariner. A comparison, indeed, of the two burdens may throw some light on the magnitude of the Mariner's agony, for it seems most insufficient to see no meaning beyond the simple release of the Mariner on his repeating his story. The burden in both cases seems ultimately no less than cosmic.

Then we can say that both these stories are indebted to antiquity and particularly the overcharged atmosphere and broadside thrust of much medieval writing. Tolkien's extensive dependence upon Norse and other mythologies is everywhere apparent. And Lowes makes clear Coleridge's indebtedness to a world of reading much of which harks far backwards. Not only did Coleridge adopt the ancient ballad stanza for his poem, but in the earliest version he filled the whole with archaisms and "antique" spelling. House points out the Gothic affiliations of the "Mariner."⁸ In Tolkien's case I would think no one would seriously question that the machinations of the Ringwraiths through their master Sauron produce a horror outstripping, for our century at least, the

Gothic ones of Horace Walpole, "Monk" Lewis, and Clara Reeve. Sometimes description itself, apart from action, conveys horror. The desolation before the gates of Mordor is an example. "Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about." (II, 239) It is not unlike Coleridge's "thousand thousand slimy things," his sweating dead bodies, and the rotting deck of his ship above the rotting sea, horrible in any period but partaking unquestionably of Gothicism.

Again, both accounts are highly imaginative journeys which carry the principals to vast and unknown areas over which they are led, or driven, by strong and often unknown forces. Their direction is sometimes unsure and their movements uncertain. Destiny seems suspended over them. Both learn a greater appreciation of natural and supernatural worlds. Both feel the permeative terror of nature and, on the other hand, its maternalizing strength. To neither of them will food and water ever taste the same, for they discover as few men ever do their more than natural goodness and life-givingness. They both anticipate their homegoing with joy, but they go back realizing that a new dimension has been added to their outlook. "Though I may come to the Shire," says Frodo on his way home, "it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same" (III, 268). The Mariner is likewise saddened by the plangent effect of changes in his innermost parts. Their souls have traveled on "a wide wide sea" which had the effect of shedding new light on land and water, earth and sky, and men and things.

In neither the poem nor the story is the chief adventurer fundamentally heroic. House says that the Mariner is "not a great adventurer, though he has a great spiritual experience,"⁹ words I believe equally applicable to Frodo. Discovering the ominous quality of the One Ring, Frodo laments: "I am not made for perilous quests, I wish I had never seen the Ring: Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" (I, 70) Later, at the Council of Elrond, when the full implication of the One Ring fell upon him, Frodo could feel nothing but a great dread, "as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace...filled all his heart" (I, 284). In the Mariner's case he came to the point of envy of his dead fellow sailors, but Death had lost the throw of dice and he was therefore condemned to the status of Life-in-Death, a status not unlike that of Frodo as he approaches Mordor and Mount Doom. It can be added that Frodo and Sam's experience in that place involved the same sidereal loneliness in Mordor that the Mariner experienced on the ship with the dead sailors lying about him.

Both stories, again, are alike in being at once clear, sharp narratives and at the same time bearing rich but mysterious meaning that seems capable of infinite interpretation. One may wonder almost endlessly why the specter-ship appears just long enough for the mariners to see the two figures casting dice and one triumphing over the Mariner as her victim, but the fact that it happens is clear enough. Both stories rise above allegory into myth and thus offer themselves to a wide field of view. It is commonly agreed that both have a rich moral, or even religious, underlay. While no one will claim that his explanation of either is final or wholly comprehensive, it is not chance that makes the best interpretations of each no less than a strongly moral one. The *Rings*, says Michael Straight, "illuminates the inner consistency of reality." Very much the same comment on the "Mariner" is made by House: "Its imagery, both of religion and of the elements, goes deep below the surface of what we may happen to remember or happen to have seen." Says Dorothy E. K. Barber of the *Rings*: "The basis...is the metaphor 'God is light.'" "I have never found a reader of Tolkien," says Guy Davenport, "who did not see what blackened the Dark Lord or why the ring of power must be destroyed, yet many of them were not aware that the gift of their understanding is millennia old, given them anew by a man who knows that there are some things that cannot be allowed to fade."¹⁰ Coleridge had dreamed of a great poem in which he might record and unify all human knowledge and wisdom. The few pages of the "Mariner" suggest something of this broad spectrum, and I think we can say that beyond doubt Tolkien endeavors to inculcate wisdom if not actual knowledge.

Both writers are able to leave the mind of the reader filled with a glow that is greater than simple emotion, one involving the realization of profound meaning, even when that meaning cannot be easily rationalized.

At first it seems that a basic difference between the two pieces resides in the innocence of Frodo and the guilt of the Mariner from slaying the albatross. This is perhaps a genuine difference, yet something can be said as to possible similarity. There are critics who believe that the Shire had become for Frodo and the other hobbits a retreat and an escape from (in Keats's words)

those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.¹¹

Frodo and his friends went out and discovered other people and their needs and helped destroy the dark shadow hovering over all Middle Earth. Their world was thereby enlarged and, as with the Mariner, their "crime" was "expiated." But there was indeed a real crime, or rather series of crimes, of no minor significance back of the Fellowship's experiences in the *Rings*. The first crime was that of Morgoth and Sauron proving rebellious to a "calling in the First Age of Middle Earth. Two other crimes were the kin-killing among the elves in the First Age and the Numenorean attempt in the Second Age to storm Aman the Blessed and gain, or gain back, everlasting life. Of course Frodo and the hobbits had no part in either of these crimes, and should we accept them as the cause of the Third Age wars we must see Frodo's part in the suffering as a vicarious one.

There are other elements of agreement in these two pieces that seem noteworthy. For instance, both tend to make more than usual of contrasts. Critics have pointed out in Coleridge the strong contrasts, which often follow one another quickly, between noise and silence, sudden calm and swift movement, thirst and slaking of thirst, the peaceful versus the terrible, etc. In Tolkien contrasts are also seemingly more than accidental. One of the greatest is that of the darkness, danger, and death in the caverns of Moria with the following peace and benignity of Lothlorien. The one is all fierce hatred and brute power, the other sublime grace and supernal beauty. In Lothlorien Sam said he felt as if he were inside a song (I, 365).

As in Coleridge, the slaking of thirst after desperate dryness is an element in the *Rings*. In the forlorn wastes and shriveled scenery of Mordor, Sam and Frodo, desperately thirsty, come joyfully upon water trickling out of a cliff, "the last remains, maybe, of some sweet rain gathered from sunlit seas" and to them it "seemed beyond all praise" (III, 197-198). One means of gaining contrast in both writers is through memory. Through memory the quiet past of the hobbits and the glorious one of the elves and dwarfs is lit up with delight. Often the memories originate through their songs and sometimes under the most adverse circumstances, as when Gimli in the black darkness of Moria sang of western seas and fairer days when the world was young (I, 329-330). In Coleridge the sweet songs of the spirits help create in the Mariner a memory recorded in what is for me the loveliest passage in the poem, the memory in the Mariner, so long exiled from land, of the sounds of home—the sweet jargoning of the little birds and the pleasant sound of

a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.

Over and over in the tense circumstances of their struggle the sharp, warm memory of the Shire gives the hobbits renewed courage. Sometimes it is a longer and deeper memory. After victory over Sauron the minstrel rose up and his voice was glorious. He sang to them, sometimes in the Elvish tongue and sometimes in Western words, "until their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness" (III, 232). For the Wedding Guest the story is painful, but in both cases the hypnotic power is present. It would be possible to write at length on elements of contrast in Tolkien and along the same lines as those identified in Coleridge.

The two images of contrast in the two writers are sometimes quite similar. The "slimy things" that "live on" in Coleridge remind us of the ubiquitous presence of the nasty Gollum slithering in the footsteps of Frodo and eating raw fish.¹² Coleridge's "rotting sea" is more than a little suggestive of the Dead Marshes through which Gollum led Frodo and Sam—waters "all foul, all rotting, all dead," where corpses long since dead lit up "like dimly shining smoke, some like misty flames flickering slowly above unseen candles; here and there...twisted like ghostly sheets unfurled by hidden hands" (II, 234). The picture, though less colorful, is not unlike that of the shining and twisting water creatures underneath the Mariner's ship. The storm "tyrannous and strong" which drove the ship south and the spirit from the south pole which later drove it northward in a frenzy are partly like the great snowstorm against which the Fellowship wrestled on Caradhras. "Let those call it the wind who will," says Boromir during the terror of the storm, "there are fell voices on the air; and these stones are aimed at us" (I, 302). Like the ship of the Mariner, Frodo and his friends were at the mercy of the elements.

Supernatural or at least preternatural elements are another strong element of similarity in Coleridge and Tolkien. In both stories non-human forces frequently participate in the action—trees, birds, Seeing Stones, and the rings themselves. At Bruinen Ford when the black Ringwraiths came closest to capturing the One Ring, Frodo was saved by a "plumed cavalry of waves" rushing down the river to overthrow the demon riders. And human forms also take on superhuman qualities. When Frodo and his friends first saw Glorfindel as he rode his horse against the dark shadows of the woods, it seemed as if "a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider," and, having used Glorfindel's great horse to outrun the Ringwraiths, Frodo, looking back across the Loudwater, saw Glorfindel as "a white figure that shone and did not grow dim like the others" (I, 221, 227, 235). Equally present is the preternatural Sauron and his nine horrible followers, who haunt the *Rings* as the specter-ship and the spirits nine fathoms deep haunt the "Mariner."

Again, though the motives are different in each case, the evil eye of Sauron holds Pippin as transfixed as the glittering eye of the Mariner holds the Wedding Guest. A curse hangs over the Mariner that is similar to Sauron's curse in the *Rings*. One of the most supernatural of all the actions, and contributing strongly to the moral tone of the *Rings*, is Aragorn's raising of the unresting dead (from their failure to keep a vow) under black Dwimorberg and leading them in long procession into battle against the common enemy (III, 59ff).

Both stories have an essential Catholic orientation which is chiefly marked by the Virgin as gift-giver, prayer-answerer, and guardian saint. But this can be said only if we regard Galadriel (or, at more distance, Elbereth Gilthoniel) as symbol of the Virgin. The Mariner says plainly that it was the Virgin who sent the sleep that "slid" into his soul. Sam prayed to Galadriel for water and light, both of which were shortly given. Furthermore, no man could well be more devoted to the Virgin than Sam and Gimli to Galadriel. The songs of the blessed spirits in the "Mariner" were sent down, according to Coleridge's gloss, "by the invocation of the guardian saint." In the post-Lothlorien adventures Galadriel serves the same purpose. She not only gives unimaginably good gifts but also leaves in her wake memories "more strengthening than any food made by man," (I, 385) and thus suggests the Eucharist. The crystal phial, another of her gifts, was to be to them a light "in dark places, when all other lights go out" (I, 393) and can hardly be mistaken for anything but a more than natural gift, possibly the Holy Spirit. Indeed all of Galadriel's gifts are more than natural.

Both stories bear an overtone of reverence for life and this because both writers regarded life as numinous. Coleridge's gloss on the famous verse beginning, "He prayeth best, who loveth best" is as follows: "And to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth." Though some have seen in the "Mariner" no deeper moral than that of being kind to dumb animals, the best critics have suggested things more profound. In the *Rings* a quietly magnificent sense of the significance of human life and positive values is everywhere apparent. The Mariner's religious renovation began when he discovered himself blessing the sea creatures and afterwards was able to pray. Frodo in

the course of time also develops a deeper sense of values, a direction best seen in his relations with Gollum. In the beginning Frodo had asked Gandalf why Bilbo "did not stab that vile creature" when he had the chance, but the time came when Frodo, like the Mariner, gained a more adequate realization of the sacredness of life. Though only his hidden coat of mail saved Frodo from Saruman's dagger, he refused to let Sam kill this bitter and depraved enemy. "He was great once, of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hands against," said Frodo. And anyway, "It is useless to meet revenge with revenge; it will heal nothing" (III, 298-299). The same nobility marks the common practice of all the real moral agents in the Rings.

Finally I shall mention Charles Williams' commendation of "The Ancient Mariner" as a poem that attains to faerie, that is, assumes sovereignty over all its materials and by creating its own unique myth makes the suspension of disbelief not only possible but obligatory. Because Coleridge first puts poetry into his "philosophy," the reader is prepared to accept the philosophy in the poem. (On the other hand, says Williams, the essential unity of Wordsworth's poems is sometimes broken by moral instruction left to lie unabsorbed by the poetry.)¹⁴ Can it be said that Tolkien's Rings suspends disbelief by a similar accomplishment? I think so. Tolkien manages to dip his characters, his action and his landscape into faerie. Like all good art, faerie in this instance succeeds in making a secondary world of elves, hobbits, and the like into a world even more convincing than our primary world. To do this it must above all things avoid so much as a hint that the story is a dreamed or imagined one or to show in any wise a "frame." It must simply be. Men, says Tolkien, are a "refracted Light" and make "by the law in which we're made."¹⁵ Anything short of such a recognition is bound to fall somewhat short of the best. What Tolkien hints at, I think, is the fact that unity—an utter unity—is itself a symbol of the seamless universe to which our longing aspires. Tolkien is of course no exception to the rule that it is not for humans to attain this perfection, but the fact remains that he has lifted millions of readers into a world more complete and more meaningful than their own.

I am of course not unaware of significant differences between "The Ancient Mariner" and The Lord of the Rings, but in this paper I have been concerned with some of their parallels. In closing I should like, however, to emphasize that both are stories and not tracts, not even allegories. Tolkien has urgently insisted that the Rings has "no meaning outside itself," and he would undoubtedly agree with Coleridge's judgment that a proper story should "simply permit the images presented to work by their own force, without either denial or affirmation of their real existence in the judgment."¹⁶ At the same time I do not forget Humphry House's insistence that the reader of the "Mariner" cannot help being "aware that its whole development is governed by moral situations, and that without them there wouldn't really be a story."¹⁷ This I am convinced is equally true of Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings.

NOTES

¹ Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" The Nation (April 14, 1956) p. 312.

- 2 Lawrence Hanson, The Life of S. T. Coleridge (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962) p. 344.
- 3 Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-52 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953) p. 28.
- 4 Angles and Britons (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1963) p. 39.
- 5 The Road to Xanadu (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927) p. 3.
- 6 The Lord of the Rings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) III, 265.
- 7 Though one of the marked differences between "The Ancient Mariner" and the Rings is the location of one on the sea and the other on land, it is noteworthy that Frodo found at Rivendell everything to make him happy "except the sea." (III, 265) Earlier Arwen had said to him, "If your hurts grieve you still and the memory of your burden is heavy, then you may pass into the West, until all your wounds and weariness are healed." (III, 252-253) Going into the West involved sailing a long journey. And though we must assume it was not the same for Frodo, the same water was filled with Coleridgean terrors when Earendil passed that way in the First Age of Middle Earth. (I, 246-249)
- 8 Humphry House, op. cit., p. 86.
- 9 Humphry House, op. cit., p. 96.
- 10 The four quotations are, in order, from The New Republic, January 16, 1956, p. 26; Humphry House, op. cit., pp. 86-87; Dorothy E. K. Barber, "The Structure of The Lord of the Rings," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1965, p. 192; and National Review, April, 1965, p. 334.
- 11 "The Fall of Hyperion," 11. 148-149.
- 12 Dr. Robert Siegel of Dartmouth College, to whom I am indebted for critical aid in the writing of this paper, points out the potential contrast of good in such ugly things as Gollum (in Tolkien) and the slimy things (in Coleridge). The Mariner acquired the ability to see another side to the water creatures, just as Frodo did to Gollum.
- 13 That Sam's calling to Elbereth (II, 339) was indeed a prayer is made clear by The Road Goes Ever On, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967, pp. 65-66.
- 14 The English Poetic Mind (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) p. 168.
- 15 Tree and Leaf (London: Unwin Books, 1964) p. 49.
- 16 Biographia Literaria, ch. 22.
- 17 Op. cit., pp. 89-91.

