Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1. Life

- **Born** in Devonshire in 1772.

- **Studied** at Christ’s Hospital School in London, and then in Cambridge, but *never graduated*.

- Influenced by **French revolutionary** ideals.

- After the **disillusionment** with the French Revolution, he planned a **utopian society**, Pantisocracy, in Pennsylvania, based on equal rights and without private property. This project failed.

- Fruitful artistic **collaboration** with the poet and friend **William Wordsworth** in the 1797-1799 period.

- **Died** in 1834.
2. Main works

1798 → *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the first poem of the collection *Lyrical Ballads*

1816 → the dreamlike poem *Kubla Khan*, composed under the influence of opium

1817 → *Biographia Literaria*, a classic text of literary criticism and autobiography.

Coleridge also held lectures about literature and journalism. He started Shakespearian criticism.
### 3. Coleridge and Wordsworth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wordsworth’s poetry</th>
<th>Coleridge’s poetry</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>• Things from ordinary life</td>
<td>• Supernatural characters and events</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aim</strong></td>
<td>• To give these ordinary things the charm of novelty and show the moral values of simple life.</td>
<td>• To make extraordinary events credible (so supernatural and realistic elements coexist)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td>• The simple language of common men</td>
<td>• Archaic language rich in sound devices</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Main interest</strong></td>
<td>Relationship between man and nature; imagination as a means of knowledge</td>
<td>The creative power of imagination</td>
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</table>
Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge did not view nature as a moral guide or a source of consolation.

It represented the presence of the ideal in the real.

It was not identified with the divine.

Coleridge saw it in a sort of neo-Platonic interpretation, as the reflection of the perfect world of ‘ideas’.

The material world is nothing but the projection of the world of ‘ideas’ into the real. That’s why natural images carry abstract meanings.
The story of a mariner who commits an act against nature by killing an albatross.

• At the beginning of the poem the mariner stops a wedding guest: he ‘cannot choose but hear’ a sad, mysterious story about the burden of the mariner’s guilt.

• The mariner expiates his sin by travelling around and telling the people he meets his story to teach them love and respect to nature’s creatures.

• The reason why the Mariner kills the Albatross remains a mystery: it’s an act against nature and it probably represents the eternal conflict between man and nature. Man always tries to overcome its limits, going against natural laws.

• The atmosphere is mysterious and dream-like.
5. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

The characters

• **The mariner** → He is *unnaturally old*, with skinny hands and ‘glittering Eyes’.

• **Sailors** → *Ill-fated* members of the ship carrying the mariner.

• **Wedding guest** → One of three people on their way to a wedding reception. After the Ancient Mariner’s story, he becomes both ‘sadder and... Wiser’.
### 6. The Rime and medieval ballads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>The Rime</th>
<th>Medieval ballads</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mostly written in four-line stanzas; a mixture of dialogue and narration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>A dramatic story in verse</td>
<td>A dramatic story in verse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Archaic; realistic in details and imagery</td>
<td>Archaic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Frequent repetitions, refrain; alliteration and internal rhyme</td>
<td>Repetitions, refrain, alliteration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Travel and wandering; the supernatural</td>
<td>Magic, love, domestic tragedies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim</td>
<td>Didactic</td>
<td>No aim</td>
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</table>
This poem has been interpreted in different ways:

- **Description of a dream.**

- **Religious reading:** an allegory of the life of the soul: from crime, through punishment, to redemption (it’s also a metaphor of man’s original sin in Eden).

- **An artistic reading:** the mariner represents the poet who looks for truth and knowledge in his everyday life. He goes through a painful experience, but is finally saved by the power of imagination.

- **For both readings the turning point** in part 4, when he blesses the water snakes: he is able to see the beauty even in the worst aspects of nature.
In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* Coleridge expresses the feeling of the *sublime* in the human fear, the paralyses and terror in front of intense natural phenomena, like extreme weather conditions (the storm, the ice and its frightening sounds, the scorching sun...). So, the sublime comes from impressive natural elements.

In *L’Infinito* by Leopardi the feeling of the sublime is not generated by impressive natural phenomena, but by something the poet can’t actually see. He can only imagine the dimension of the infinite (beyond the hedge, beyond his human limits). So, the sublime comes from the power of imagination, from the poet’s mind and not from the outside world.
Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,
E questa siepe, che da tanta parte
Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
Silenzi, e profondissima quiete
Io nel pensier mi fingo; **ove per poco**
Il cor non si spaura. E come il vento
Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
Infinito silenzio a questa voce
Vo comparando: e mi sovviem l'eterno,
E le morte stagioni, e la presente
E viva, e il suon di lei. Cosi tra questa
Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
**E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.**