“Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Kubla Khan”, and “Christabel” are much traveled roads to the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Regrettably, the common reader's adventurous journey to Coleridge’s realms of wonder usually ends there. Is there really nothing beyond this introduction?

I dare say that there is much more and better poetry by Coleridge that has not been appreciated yet. As a common thread through the works of Coleridge, there is the theme of life and death. They are very often pictured via symbolic devices in his poems. To make the effect even more powerful, the poet contrasts the particular symbols in dialectical pairs, such as the rose and the raven, sun and moon, or day and night. The dialectics create a certain tension and the tension is the fate to the realms of wonder. At this point, not only fancy comes into play, but also primary imagination, and, above all, the secondary imagination of the reader leading him/her to a very subjective, but unique understanding of Coleridge’s poems.

I would like to illustrate the intertwining circles of life and death by a close reading of his poem “The Raven”. However, before I can turn to the poem as such, a few words about Coleridge’s concept of love seem pertinent. Coleridge, being hypersensitive, understood love mainly as a positive power that might help people to reestablish the ‘golden age’ of earthly paradise. This concept of love can be traced not only in the essays in *The Friend* (a collection of Coleridge’s essays), but also in his personal correspondence. Coleridge was convinced that if all people shared love and practiced honesty, it would be easier to find and exercise truth as the highest value that people could ever reach. He hoped that virtue would win over vice, he hoped that love would defeat hatred so that people could devote their strength to the searching for the truth that would lead them to a true recognition of the power of God. He hoped that love between parents and their children, or between lovers could be parallel to a true worship of the Lord regardless of whether the Church was the mediator or not, because then people alone would recognize the truth without necessarily being told what the truth is and what they should believe in.

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* The terms of fancy, primary and secondary imagination are here applied in the sense as they were defined by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria.*
Furthermore, Coleridge understood very well the interdependence and counter-actions of various phenomena as personal concerns and historical issues. He knew that love and an atmosphere of understanding could not last forever. He saw a fiendish or dialectical image to love: hatred which often leads to death, either a physical or a spiritual one. Death kills love regardless of the previous strong attachment. I would like to illustrate the ways a symbol of death, a raven, works in Coleridge’s poetry. The poet uses the symbols so as to make people aware that love cannot always win, because the powers of death are stronger. To prove my assertion, I would like to turn the attention to the discussion of the poem “The Raven”. Every single detail that appears there has its own value and its own place. All of them together build an effective unit of symbols which are then juxtaposed with each other.

The poem is introduced as a Christmas tale. It invites the reader to enter the spirit of times of wonder and to let the imagination flourish. Just as the poem begins, the first circle of life is introduced: “underneath an old oak tree” (line 1) – The tree is old and although it has seen many a day, it could stay alive much longer if it were not for the swines (which could well be a metaphor for greedy people) which caused its death for purely selfish reasons: for their grudge. They would not have left there even a single acorn, out of which a new tree (equal to new life) could grow, if it were not for a storm that came all of sudden. The storm is symbolic, and it represents God’s intervention into the matters on the earth. The acorn that the swines had to leave there gives life to a new oak tree which gives shelter to other animals as well. The only acorn that was left begins thus a new life circle.

Besides the oak tree that plays one of the prime roles, a raven enters the scene. The raven, “blacker was he than blackest jet” (line 9), gives the impression of a very dark day when melancholy rules and the raven is one of her companions: “he belonged, they did say, to the witch Melancholy!” (line 8) The raven – a symbol for dreadful situations and places (here the idea is supported by the suggestion that the raven is one of the messengers of the destructive melancholy) – has the role and attributes of a mystical creature. This view is further supported by the passage where the raven “flew low in the rain and his feathers [were] not wet.” (line 10) Coleridge introduces here some aspects from the world beyond ours. He also uses these symbols in order to show that rational explanation cannot always be applied. For example, Coleridge did not find a suitable and reasonable answer to the question why despair, hatred and death should always win against positive values such as joy, love and life.

The raven, a conventional sign of something rather negative or pessimistic, is here used as a symbol of tragic anticipation. Besides, “it not only bodes death, but ... some say that ravens foster forlorn children the whilst their own birds (= the younger ones) famish in their nest.” (Vries 382) In this sense, the raven could be seen to parallel a similar relationship between Coleridge and his father. The Reverend John Cole-ridge was always preoccupied with the parishioners at Ottery St. Mary and young Samuel felt he never got enough attention, time, and love from his father.

The raven, which is largely used as an epitome of sadness, acquires in this poem just the opposite qualities. This example represents Coleridge’s love for experiments
with words, symbols, and metaphors. The raven finds his mate after enormous effort and they abide in happiness, which is short-lived. The atmosphere of the poem in the beginning takes a promising direction: “and young ones they had and were very happy anow./ But...” (line 23–24) This “but” at the beginning of the next line signals a return to reality, to the world which destroys love many a time. This confrontation leads to a consideration of the principles established here on earth. So far, no explanation has been found of the question why every joy of life and love should be overwhelmed by woe which is often the companion of death.

The harmonious life of the birds is violently destroyed. The tree where the birds had their nest is cut down by a woodman, the raven gets furious and wishes for severe recompense for the death of his young ones “and their mother [who] did die of a broken heart.” (line 30) There, again, life is surpassed by death and the life and death circles intertwine suggesting the never ending rotation of life and death. In “The Raven”, the recompense comes in as a satisfaction for the bird; and for it to be true recompense, it has to be compensated by the death of some other creatures, especially that of the woodman.

“He [raven] 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 his treat:
They had taken his all, and REVENGE IT WAS SWEET! (lines 39–44)

The raven takes delight in observing the woodman die in a cruel way similar to the way his young ones died. When the woodman came to cut down the oak tree where the raven had its nest, the raven could no longer retain his rather uncommon role of representing something positive. He changed from the temporary representative of happiness and love to his traditional position: the representative of death, namely, of death out of revenge.

The whole tragedy happens due to the felling of an old oak tree. The raven had its nest in its crown, and there seemed to be a perfect symbiosis between the raven and the tree. In the biblical symbolism, a tree might stand for a life-giving strength, for a shrine, and, moreover, a green tree is a symbol of an honest person blessed by God. The oak tree then, brings up the connotations of closeness, longevity, immortality, and regeneration. (Vries 347) When the oak tree is cut down, its strength irrevocably passes. A felled oak tree represents a case of fatal mistake by the woodman. He has to put up with the consequences of his bad judgment. He came to cut down the tree because he wanted to use its wood for selfish purposes (this is similar to the grudge of the swines in the beginning of the poem). The woodman used the oak wood to make a ship, but, absurdly, this ship became his coffin. It is, again, symbolic, because coffins are very often made of oak. Here the symbol of life turned into a symbol of death.
Coleridge uses the symbol of an oak tree repeatedly. I think it might be due to a coincidence with his recollections from early childhood. As Holmes describes, Coleridge with his brother Francis once went to see “the Pixies' Parlour, a mysterious sandstone cave beneath the roots of an ancient oak tree”. (12) Young Samuel remembered this occasion very vividly with all the details, because it perfectly fitted into his imaginative world. He uses the oak tree later in his poem, for example in “Christabel”, as a symbol for the above mentioned attributes. The cave also found its place among the images in both the essays in *The Friend* and in “Allegoric Vision”.

Relating the poem to the social context of the time, the raven, the oak tree, and other symbols here show, as I contend, aside from other meanings, Coleridge’s disappointment and fear of the French Revolution of 1789. The ship was symbolically caught in a storm, and it “bulged on a rock, and the waves rushed in fast.” (line 37) The storm symbolically reflects the turmoil of the changes in the society at the end of the eighteenth century. The old faith, symbolized by the oak tree, is undermined, and no certainty remains, everything seems to be uprooted. Still, the situation might offer 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.

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 portrayal of these ideas by implication makes them more striking. It is even supported by the slow exposition of the central point of the poem; it makes the sudden twist possible and it again strikes the reader as unexpected.

Love for and desire for freedom were corrupted for selfish goals in France. Similarly, the freedom of the raven living on an 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.

As already mentioned above, Coleridge often, maybe even unconsciously, contrasted his symbols in dialectical pairs. A dialectic to raven is a rose – a symbol which occurs frequently in his poems. Coleridge used both as attributes of love. The rose was its positive manifestation, whereas the raven stood for its negative counterpart. Their antithetical character is emphasized by their color symbolism: the rose is frequently either white or red, and the raven is black. This combination of colors means: white – “birth and growth” but also purity, and immaculation, red – “love and battle”, and black – “death-divination”. (Vries 108) In this sense, they could be understood as symbols of the life-love-hatred-death circle. The life is born pure, love abides in the
soul, it battles for its place in the heart, it culminates in the true passion, but either some hatred or the anticipation of death spoils it. Finally, lovers are separated by death which causes an end of one life circle. So, in my opinion, the rose and the raven could be seen as a dialectic. They both approach the same idea, but from different ends. However, they both signalize a kind of disaster for love and life.

To sum up: Coleridge tended to speak about the interdependence of life and death through symbolic, metaphorical, and allegorical devices, because they offered him the opportunity to show interdependence of nature, man, and God in a very complex way. There could always be found numerous meanings on various levels. Not a straightforward way of exploring the human existence and its termination was the theme found worthy of going into because Coleridge wanted to go through the haze of the mysterious in order to reach the realm of wisdom in the end.

SECONDARY LITERATURE


