

# **Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions Study Guide**

**Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions by Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

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# Plot Summary

Biographia Literaria by Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the book that Coleridge wanted to write for a long time, examining the relationships between literature and philosophy. The book began as a conversation between Coleridge and his neighbor, William Wordsworth, although the book did not appear for another seventeen years. Coleridge provided the ideas for the Preface to the second edition of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads and this then was developed into Biographia Literaria, which he dreamed about writing for a long time.

Biographia Literaria is concerned with the form of poetry, the genius of the poet and the relationship to philosophy. Coleridge feels that all of the great writers had their basis in philosophy because philosophy was the sum of all knowledge at this time. All education at that time consisted of a study of philosophy. Coleridge examines issues like the use of language in poetry and how it relates to everyday speech. He looks at the relationship between the subject of poetry and its relationship to everyday life.

Coleridge examines the sources of poetic power which relates to the brilliance of the poet. This involves the use of language, meter, rhyme, and the writing style or the poetic diction. The poet, he feels, should write about subjects that are outside his own sensations and experiences. This is where the poetic genius comes from. If the poet confines his poetry to subjects within his own experiences, then the work is mediocre. Coleridge feels that the purpose of poetry is to communicate beauty and pleasure. This is an expression of the brilliance of the poet.

A great deal of Coleridge's works were the analysis and criticism of other writers. There are many passages from various authors in Biographia Lieteraria and much of the book examines the works of Wordsworth and Shakespeare, both contemporaries of Coleridge, as Coleridge examines the link between literature and philosophy. He also examines the views of Des Cartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, as well as other philosophers. He uses this approach to examine the source of the poet's imagination. The brilliance of the poet must elicit feelings of excitement and emotion in the reader and Coleridge examines how this process functions and why some writers are more popular than others.

Coleridge also addresses the issue of literary critics, some of whom he had problems with regarding his own works. He feels that the critics must find something wrong with a literary work in order to sell reviews. Therefore, many reviews are unfair and the result of personal animosity.

Coleridge accomplishes his goal of examining the relationship between philosophy and literature in this book.



# Chapter I

## Chapter I Summary and Analysis

Coleridge states that his name has often appeared in conversation and print in spite of the distance he keeps from the literary world. He feels it necessary to address controversy surrounding the true nature of poetry and the character of the poet. He published his first book of poems at the age of twenty-three. He admits that there were faults with them but he was not able to accept the criticism of others. Coleridge refers to this work, *Poems of Various Subjects*, as his juvenile poems.

Coleridge talks of his education and how he read the ancient Greeks and Romans as well as Milton and Shakespeare. He feels his master did a good job in giving him a classical education. He was exposed to the sonnets of William Bowles when he was seventeen and was very impressed by them. He likes writing in verse and preferred contemporary writers because he could identify with them. The contemporary writers helped him shape his own tastes and opinions. Coleridge claims he had a passion for metaphysical investigations at this time.

His style of writing changed while he was in his twenties from a very florid style to shorter blank verse poems.



## Chapter II

### Chapter II Summary and Analysis

Coleridge feels that when man has vivid ideas, there are endless ways to modify and combine them. These can be used to form a perfect poem or work of art. He quotes the works of Shakespeare in which he praises his rivals. Coleridge feels that it is natural to be jealous of rivals.

Coleridge notes how the language has changed from the days of Chaucer and Gower. Literature and poetry require less talent and information than do other trades. It is possible for writers to be libelers due to envy and malevolence but to be successful with the public. Others are men of genius. Sensibility is part of genius.

Coleridge feels that his greatest fault is his indifference to public opinion. He is indifferent to praise and has little interest in the sale and profit of his works, even though he has to survive. Coleridge feels that he cannot afford any indignation at literary wrongs. He leaves that to others. He feels that poetry demands an attention that is much greater than that of any other profession. Poetry to Coleridge, is an honorable pursuit and a glorious attainment. It is a work of beauty and elegance.



## Chapter III

### Chapter III Summary and Analysis

Coleridge says he owes two-thirds of his reputation to critics. The public remembers the remarks of the critics and Coleridge feels that he has been subject to much abuse which he does not deserve. He claims he has not engaged on any controversies or disputes beyond that of the normal social interchange of opinions. He does not understand why anyone would envy him or be vindictive toward him

Coleridge feels that the only chance he has had to anger anyone is when his essays of national interest were published in newspapers. Those who do not agree with his views might be angered by his opinions. His lectures were on the criticism of Shakespeare and Milton.

All men who can read sit as critics of a writer's work. Many reviewers will copy and print a work that they review, especially if he views it as worthless. There are often more copies of the review than there were of the original work as the reviewer makes his own copies for distribution. Coleridge basically does not feel that most critics are qualified to write reviews. The reviews that are informative actually emphasize the beauty of the work and not what is wrong with it in his opinion.

Coleridge discusses Robert Southey and how he experimented with all forms of literary style. Known for his essays on topics of national interests, Southey was popular with the public, even though he was sometimes harshly treated by the critics.



# Chapter IV

## Chapter IV Summary and Analysis

Coleridge discusses the works of William Wordsworth in this chapter. His works opened up a new school of poetry especially the Lyrical Ballads. Coleridge feels that these big works lend themselves to criticism. He says that the more the author writes, the more material the critic has to criticize.

Wordsworth's first publication occurred when Coleridge was in his last year of residence at Cambridge. Coleridge thought Wordsworth was a literary genius. They first met in Bristol when Coleridge was twenty-four years of age and this was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

Coleridge quotes various parts of Wordsworth's works that he uses to make his points about the poet's genius and the way that Wordsworth's mind works. Coleridge believed that this could be deduced from the poet's poetry in terms of what he said and the words he used. Even though he did not always agree with Wordsworth, he was very impressed with him and his works.





# Chapter V

## Chapter V Summary and Analysis

Coleridge believes that there have always been men who viewed their own nature as a problem and have spent their time trying to find a solution to the problem. They were concerned with problems of the will. People have always been concerned with the origination of perception and look at the different aspects of man's nature. Man's inner experiences are arranged in terms of the passive sense, the voluntary, and the spontaneous. Others believed that the law of association was the basis of how the mind worked. Coleridge disagrees with them and looks at the views of Hobbs and Des Cartes in his discussion.

The law of association was defined before Des Cartes and Hobbs and dates back to Melanchthon, Amerback, and Ludovicus Vives who sought to explain the power of comprehension. Philosophers like Aristotle also examined the functioning of the mind. Aristotle believed that ideas could recall each other and become a part of a whole. There are five agents. They are connection in time, connection in space, interdependence, likeness, and contrast. These five agents link ideas and result in ideas calling each other in the after-consciousness. These associative powers become memory or fancy. Coleridge is trying to examine how readers interpret and are affected by poetry. This is why he is interested in the area of perceptions. There is no field of psychology developed at this period of time.



## Chapter VI - VII

### Chapter VI - VII Summary and Analysis

This section looks at David Hartley's diversion from Aristotle. He looks at the chain of association and feels that contemporaneity is the basis of the law of associations. If there is no interference from will, reason, or judgment, the most likely result is that the idea can imitate the order of the impressions or those that recall other impressions. This would result in delirium.

To examine this further, Coleridge uses an example of a young girl in Gottingen, Germany, who was ranting and raving from a fever. They were interested in things she was ranting about and where they came from. Coleridge concludes that the mind records every word it hears and pieces of this are played back during delirium. His conclusions came from the girl with the high fever.

Chapter VII continues the examination of the law of association and how the chain of associations can result in chaos. These are sensations and thoughts that are at work, even though people think that they are acting rationally. Different ideas and notions are linked together through various associations even though the person does not know it. There is a cause and effect sequence.

# Chapter VIII - IX

## Chapter VIII - IX Summary and Analysis

This section considers the system of Dualism which was developed by Des Cartes and refined by both Spinoza and Leibniz. To Des Cartes, the soul was intelligence and the body was matter. The soul did the thinking. The eternal work refers to the images and modifications of man's own experiences.

In Chapter IX, Coleridge, who has studied Locke, Berkeley, Leibniz, and Hartley, begins to ask if philosophy as a system differs from history and historic classification. The human mind observes, collects, and classifies. Coleridge investigates man's nature and how he learns.

Coleridge looks at some of the views of the philosopher Immanuel Kant of Prussia, who was a favorite of Coleridge. Ideas were represented by symbols. He says that Kant's followers refined the mechanics of Kant's theories.



# Chapter X - XI

## Chapter X - XI Summary and Analysis

Coleridge describes pedantry as the use of unsuitable words. Language appropriate for use in the market is not appropriate for use in the school room and he sees this as an issue in poetry.

For a while Coleridge wrote for a list of subscribers. These were a series of pamphlets. He did not see what difference it made if they gave the money to a bookseller or to the government. He developed the list of subscribers from traveling around England and lecturing.

Coleridge was Unitarian and began a campaign against other religions. His first attack was again a Calvinist in Birmingham. From there he went to Manchester where he met with different people and told them of his experiences. He traveled to other English cities relating his experience. This is how he develop his subscription list to the Watchman. He was in debt to the printer for the printing expenses as the subscribers began to cancel. He wrote against Jacobinism and on religious issues related to his Unitarian beliefs. He believed that the idea of God involved a realist, but he wondered what proof there was. Religion was the cornerstone of morality. Coleridge continued his religious education when he was in Germany.

In Chapter XI, Coleridge says that men are motivated by many motives. He compares literary men with their workers in the literary man depends on the sale of his works for his livelihood.



## Chapter XII - XIII

### Chapter XII - XIII Summary and Analysis

Coleridge continues his discussion of different philosophers. He mentions Plato and says that he is ignorant of Plato's understanding. The mind must be concerned with ideas of 'matter, spirit, soul, body action, passiveness, time, space cause and effect, consciousness, perceptions, memory and habit' (Chapter II, pg. 136.) Man then analyzes other notions within the framework of these ideas. Analyzing these different ideas does not add to knowledge.

According to Coleridge, man's spirit is free. He is incomprehensible to himself and to others. According to Leibniz, philosophy collects and explains fragments of truth. Philosophy is not like geometry and must use other methods of analysis.

Coleridge is exploring man's nature and says that positive knowledge is the result of what is conscious and unconscious. The act of knowledge is both subjective and objective at the same time. He presents a series of ten theses relating to the deduction of the imagination. These are listed below.

Thesis I is that truth must have a corresponding reality in order to be knowledge.

Thesis II says that truth is either mediate or derived from other truths, or is mediate and original.

Thesis III is that the truth must be true in itself and not conditional on something else.

Thesis IV is that there is one principle that can be proven a priori. If there were more than one, then each would refer to something else and would not be the one principle.

Thesis V is that the principle cannot be a thing or object.

Thesis VI is that the principle is found in the *Sum* or the *I Am* and is described as the self and self-consciousness.

Thesis VII is that self-consciousness is required as the way to know the self.

Thesis VIII is that if the origin of something is objective, then that something is finite. The spirit is the union of the finite and the infinite. This contraction is the mystery of life.

Thesis IX is that the mediate principle exists in the will or in the act of self-duplication.

Thesis X is that the act of self-consciousness is the source of knowledge.

In Chapter XIII, Coleridge is investigating the nature and the genius of man's imagination. He sees it as the result of two counteracting forces with the imagination

being both primary and secondary. The primary is the agent of all human perceptions. The secondary is a mirror of the primary.



# Chapter XIV - XVI

## Chapter XIV - XVI Summary and Analysis

While Coleridge was living next door to Wordsworth, he wrote 'Ancient Mariner' and other poems, as did Wordsworth. Coleridge felt he had achieved his ideal, even though he felt many of Wordsworth's poems were better than his.

Coleridge says that the technical process of philosophy is to separate the notions of truth into its distinguishable parts. They then must be restored to the whole from which they came and this is the result of philosophy. The same is true of poetry, according to Coleridge. The idea may be to communicate pleasure but the ultimate end must be either moral or intellectual. The poet should be enjoyable to the reader.

Poetry results from the poetic genius of the poet. It is involved in the solution to the nature of the poet. It expresses the tone and spirit of unity that comes from imagination.

In Chapter XV, Coleridge discusses poetic power and the quantities in a poem that result in poetic power. For these, he looks at Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis' and the 'Lucrece.' He is impressed with the sweetness of the verse and how it fits the subject. The verse is musical and results in a unity of effect. Another characteristic of the genius is that the subject is remote from the author. If the poetry is from the author's own sensations, then the work is mediocre. A third point is that objects copied from nature must be modified by a predominant passion that gives them the imagery of a painter. The fourth source of poetic power is the depth and energy of thought. Coleridge feels that a great poet must also be a philosopher since the creative power must come from all of human knowledge.

In Chapter XVI, Coleridge looks at earlier poets to compare them to those of his time. For this he looks to Italy because of its emphasis on culture and fine arts. Nature and building figure prominently in the Italian works. They are in the foreground not the background of the work. Art was a part of poetry. The language used was that of the learned.



## Chapter XVII - XVIII

### Chapter XVII - XVIII Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Coleridge applies his tenets to the works of Wordsworth. He disagrees with Wordsworth that his words are always rightly interpreted. There is a difference in Wordsworth's use of a word and the dictionary definition of the word and this affects the meaning of his works. Coleridge doesn't feel that poetry lends itself to the use of everyday language. He decides that there are certain things required for the poetry to cause pleasure. The first is the naturalness of the thing. The second is the natural way of the representation and the third is the feelings around in the reader which should be those of superiority.

Wordsworth chose to write mostly of the low rustic life so Coleridge's rules given above do not apply as stringently. In other works, like 'Brothers,' 'Michael,' 'Ruth,' and the 'Mad Mother,' the characters are not low and rustic and the language is more representative of everyday life. Coleridge feels that the characters have the mannerisms of their class.

Coleridge feels that those in low or rustic life have a limited vocabulary and do not use the best language. Coleridge feels that they basically make sounds and not language. He also feels that Wordsworth was successful in elevating beauty to its highest level in his poetry.

In Chapter XVII, Coleridge addresses the idea of metrical composition. Wordsworth feels that there is no difference between writing in prose and writing metrical composition. Coleridge feels that neither should be like ordinary talking.

Meter originates from a balance of the mind that checks passion. Meter comes from a state of excitement and should be expressed in the language of poetry. It is the result of the interplay between passion and will. Meter arouses feelings and emotions in the reader. Coleridge feels that meter gives poetry its proper form.



# Chapter XIX

## Chapter XIX Summary and Analysis

Wordsworth's theory of style was to use language that was close to the everyday language, even for those in low and rustic life. He made them into a new species in English poetry. The poet gave rhyme and meter to an apt expression of thought. This was evident in the works of Gellert. Gellert gave rhyme and meter to expressions written in the way people talk everyday.

Coleridge cites a passage from Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* to show how the poetry is rich in composition. He feels that the difference between the older and modern poets is that the first group used natural language to convey fantastic thoughts while the other group uses fantastic language to convey trivial thoughts. The results are different feelings in the reader and not always the response that the poet seeks to elicit.



## Chapter XX - XXI

### Chapter XX - XXI Summary and Analysis

Coleridge feels that the excellence he defined in the preceding chapter does represent Wordsworth's style. He uses uniform and logical English as do Bowles, Byron and Southey. Coleridge feels that Wordsworth's style and diction are so unique to him that they cannot be imitated. He cites different works to support his statement. None of these works consists of everyday spoken language.

Coleridge feels that there is not other author than Wordsworth who has so many lines that can be quoted. All of these lines are well known for their beauty.

In Chapter XXI, Coleridge says that he always wanted to see a study of the works of Wordsworth. He mentions the Edinburgh Review for its literary criticism but feels that they tend to concentrate on particular articles. He also feels that some of their reviews are arbitrary. They will condemn a work without citing it and Coleridge says that he has seen them do this to Wordsworth. He complains that they have no guidelines and rules that apply to the reviews. They write whatever they want.



# Chapter XXII

## Chapter XXII Summary and Analysis

Wordsworth experimented in some of his poetry. The poem mentioned is entitled 'Fidelity' and Wordsworth wrote in a lower form of language. Wordsworth claims the experiment failed. Coleridge says Wordsworth's tendency towards greatness still came through even though there is some inconstancy in style. He uses a style that consists of three divisions of language. The first is language that is peculiar to poetry. The second is language that is proper to prose. The third is language that is common to both.

Coleridge also mentions Crowley who mixes verse and prose. with the poetry interspersed throughout the prose. Coleridge does not feel that this approach satisfies a cultivated taste. He cites several examples to prove his point and says that there is an era of incongruity. Coleridge also feels that there is what he calls, a certain matter-of-fact nature to the poetry. This results in a defect as does a flair for the dramatic. Sometimes the authors use thoughts and images that are too great for the subject. This results in thoughts that are disproportionate to circumstances and occasion. The readers react to the diction and imagery.

Another criticism that Coleridge levels at Wordsworth is that his use of words is not always consistent with the dictionary usage of the word. he uncommon usage makes it difficult to understand the author's meaning. His writing still has a depth of feeling that cannot be imitated.

Coleridge also compares Wordsworth to Samuel Daniel whose work contains no mark of time or age. Coleridge feels that the works of Wordsworth are made better than Daniel's in terms of diction. His images and descriptions come directly from nature. He feels that Wordsworth's brilliance overcomes any defects.



# Conclusion

## Conclusion Summary and Analysis

Coleridge says that people sometimes punish faults by blaming things that were no part of the faults and he feels that this is the severest punishment that there is. Man must contemplate the relations of cause and effect. To Coleridge, private feeling should not interfere with writing or publishing. He feels that man should love himself as he loves his neighbors.

Coleridge received a bad review from the Edinburgh Review which he felt stemmed from personal hatred. He feels that a review must contain some bad things in order to make it salable. People will not buy it if there is not something controversial in it. He says that his metaphysics writings were also subject to criticisms. Some reviews are also the result of animosity between the reviewer and the author.

Religion is also important as is reason. He discusses the historical truths contained in sermons and the necessity of miracles. History is a pillar of the Church not a foundation. In regards to Christianity, Coleridge says it must be consistent with rights reasons. The miracles were revealed through the steps, the vestibule, and the portal of the temple. The believer feels he needs redemption and grace in Christ. These are what he calls evidences and are necessary for the Church. Coleridge says that God will never reject a soul that loves him.

Coleridge feels that the purpose of a literary life is to stimulate young minds and that this is what he hopes he has done.



# Characters

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a poet and writer. His first publication was *Poems on various Subjects* which was published in April 1796. Coleridge was twenty-three at the time. He received a good classical education with emphasis on the Greeks, the Romans, Milton, and Shakespeare. Coleridge was an orphan and had Dr. Middleton as his patron and protector. He attended Cambridge University and was attracted to contemporary writers who helped form his tastes and opinions. Coleridge earned his living by writing and lecturing. He wrote some essays of national interest that were published in newspapers, but his writings mostly emphasized criticism of others. Coleridge is concerned with the relationship between literature and philosophy and how this relationship affects the imagination of the poet. He first became acquainted with the works of Wordsworth when he was in residence at Cambridge, which he left in 1794.

Coleridge was born in Devon on October 21, 1772. Before attending James College at Cambridge, he was educated at Christ's Hospital in London. He married Sara Fricker, the sister-in-law of Robert Southey in 1795 but the marriage was unhappy. Coleridge lived abroad in Germany, Italy, and Malta during his life and worked as the secretary to the first British government. Returning to England, he lived at Highgate until his death on July 25, 1854.

## Robert Southey

Robert Southey is a writer of Coleridge's time. He is a literary friend of Coleridge. Southey wrote poems with Robert Lovell. They used the names Bion and Moschos. Coleridge felt the works were whimsical and exhibited the mistakes and immaturity to be expected in young writers. Even though Coleridge considered these to be flaws and defects, Southey preferred this style. Southey preferred a humble style of poetry. Coleridge feels that some day all of Southey's works will be gathered and published together. Some one will decide to be his biographer and readers will be happy with this approach. Southey had his critics, as did other writers and he was subject to the hostility throughout his career. They criticized both his moral and his literary character. He was a popular essayists because he wrote on subjects of interest to people instead of criticizing the works of others. He wrote his essays in an interesting style which combined with and wisdom. He was thus popular with the public. Southey's prose was entertaining, combining truth and knowledge with life and fancy. He also wrote poetry and attempted every kind of writing. Coleridge felt that Southey contained the gifts of talent and genius, no matter what the critics said about him. Southey always exhibited dignified manner and cheerful spirits.



## **William Wordsworth**

William Wordsworth was a poet and writer of the time. He first met Coleridge in Bristol in 1795 when Coleridge was twenty-four years of age. The two men became friends and eventually became neighbors. They served as inspirations for one another.

## **Washington Allston**

Washington Allston was born in 1793 and is an American artist who paints historical and religious subjects. He became friends with Coleridge when they met in Rome in 1805.

## **William Pitt**

William Pitt was a British party leader who grew in popularity after the assassination of Spencer Percival in 1812. Coleridge points out that he was not a Pittie.

## **Reverend W. L. Bowles**

Reverend W. L. Bowles was a writer during Coleridge's time. He wrote sonnets and poems. His works impressed Coleridge.

## **William Shakespeare**

William Shakespeare was a great poet and contemporary of Coleridge. He is cited frequently in the book.

## **John Milton**

John Milton was a popular English writer of the time. He is referred to and quoted many times in the course of the book.

## **Dr. Middleton**

Dr. Middleton was Coleridge's patron and protector when Coleridge was in school. Dr. Middleton died en route to India.

## **Sara Fricker**

Sara Fricker was the sister-in-law of Robert Southey. She married Coleridge in 1795.



# Objects/Places

## Cambridge University

Cambridge University is in England and is where Coleridge received his university education.

## Oxford Univeritiy

Oxford University is in England and is where Coleridge met Southey.

## Bristol

Bristol is a city in England located on the West Coast where Wordsworth and Coleridge first met in 1795.

## London

London is the capitol of England located in the southern part of the country.

## Devon

Devon is the city in England where Coleridge was born.

## Germany

Germany is located in Europe and where Coleridge lived for a year in 1798 to learn the language.

## Italy

Italy is a southern European country where Coleridge lived between 1804 and 1806.

## Malta

Malta is an island in the Mediterranean Sea south of Italy where Coleridge lived between 1804 and 1806.



## Highgate

Highgate is the place in England that Coleridge returned to after living abroad and remained at until his death.

## Prussia

Prussia was a European country that consisted of parts of Germany and Austria. It was the home of the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

## Birmingham

Birmingham is an English city northwest of London.





# Themes

## The Role of Philosophy

The role of philosophy in literature is an important underlying theme of the book. This is not unusual since the book was first published in 1817 before knowledge was divided into different schools of thought or disciplines. Most of human knowledge was contained in what was called philosophy, with science being a separate branch of knowledge. University education of the time such as Coleridge and others received, consisted of studying philosophy. Philosophy, therefore, was a natural starting point for Coleridge's study in *Biographia Literaria*. The approach taken by Coleridge in his examination of poetry and the brilliance of the poet begins with an examination of philosophers like Des Cartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and how the mind works. What is the source of the imagination of the poet? Where does the brilliance of the poet come from and how does the use of language elicit the proper response of excitement and pleasure in the reader? This is where Coleridge draws heavily on philosophy to determine how the minds of the poet and the reader functioned to see how the poet expressed his brilliance and how the words were perceived by the reader. This is the link between literature that Coleridge explores in *Biographia Literaria* and he does it by looking at the works of various authors.

## The Elements of Poetic Genius

Coleridge was interested in all aspects of poetry in *Biographia Literaria*. The purpose of poetry, according to Coleridge, is to communicate beauty and pleasure. The poetic genius or brilliance is the ability of the poet to do this and to convey this beauty and pleasure to the reader. This means that the poetry must elicit the proper responses in the reader in terms of excitement and pleasure. Coleridge examines the necessary elements in this process and how the pieces fit together. The poet communicates through the use of words so Coleridge determines that language and poetic diction are a source of poetic power. He looks at how the written verse differs from everyday speech and what effect this has on the reader. Since poets write about people on different levels of society, the choice of words is important. The use of rhyme and meter also affects the quality of the work, as does the choice of the subject of the poetry. Coleridge feels that the poet who selects a subject within the realm of his own experiences and sensations creates a mediocre work. The poet only achieves brilliance when he reaches outside his own realm of experience and sensations for a subject. The poet must use his own imagination to create a work of brilliance. The fitting of all of these pieces results in the power of the poet to communicate beauty and pleasure.



## Review of Other Author's Works

Coleridge examines the elements of good poetry and the source of poetic genius by applying the knowledge gained from philosophy to the field of literature. He examines the sources of poetic power and the ability of the poet to communicate beauty and pleasure to the reader. As Coleridge examines these different elements, he uses the works of various authors to make his point. The book contains many passages from the works of various authors, some of them several pages long as Coleridge examines different aspects of poetry and the poetic genius. In addition to reading Coleridge's analysis, the reader is also reading a wide selection of poetry and verse of different authors as Coleridge uses the works to make different points of what is and is not good. The works of William Wordsworth and William Shakespeare are liberally quoted in the books as examples of what does and does not work in poetry. Coleridge respected the brilliance of both authors and Wordsworth was his friend and neighbor. Coleridge is honest in his criticisms and points out the areas where he disagrees with the theories of Wordsworth and other authors. He uses their works as examples of how their minds and imagination work and how they are able to communicate beauty and pleasure to their readers.



# Style

## Perspective

Biographia Literaria is written from the perspective of the author, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The book was edited by George Watson. The author writes in the first person point of view since he is presenting his own analysis of the relationship between literature and philosophy. The perspective presented is that of the author, who is a poet and writer in his own right. Coleridge draws on the knowledge of philosophy to examine the functioning of the mind in his determination of the brilliance of the poet and the perception of the reader. In his examination of what are the elements of good poetry and the source of poetic genius, Coleridge quotes passages from many different authors as he makes his points and explore different aspect of the subjects.

Coleridge is well qualified to write a book of this type. He is a poet and writer. He was educated at Cambridge in the fashion of the time, which meant a study of philosophy. This is why an examination of the different philosophers and an inquiry into the functioning of the minds of the poet and the reader was a natural starting point for him. Aside from a few years working as a secretary to the first governor, he earned his living by writing and lecturing. Hence he is well qualified to write the kind of book that analyzes the link between poetry and philosophy.

## Tone

The tone of the book is subjective, which is appropriate for a book of this nature. Coleridge is analyzing the relationship between poetry and philosophy. He is presenting his own views and theories as to where the poetic brilliance arises from and what constitutes good poetry. Although he draws on many sources in philosophy and literature, the theories he presents are the results of his own views and opinions. The analysis he conducts are based on his own views and opinions. The criticisms he makes against other poets are based on his own opinions, but they are not randomly made. He develops his theories based on his examination of philosophy on how the mind works. He uses this to define the elements of poetic genius then looks at the works of various authors and analyzes them in terms of this theory. Even though he is functioning within the confines of his own theory, his analysis is still subjective and based on his own opinions of what is right and wrong with the works of the different authors. However, Biographia Literaria is the development of Coleridge's theories and his application of them. He points out places where his theories disagree with others and is honest in his approach and analysis and the reader has to respect this.

## Structure

The structure of Biographia Literaria is uncomplicated with twenty two chapters denoted by a Roman numeral. There is a section on Conclusions at the end. The chapters are of



varying lengths and instead of a chapter title, there is a summary of what the author accomplishes in each chapter. This is very helpful to the reader. The book is divided into two volumes which really has no affect on the subject matter but relates to how Coleridge wrote the work. The chapter number is given on each page of the book so the reader is always aware of the chapter which is helpful since there are no chapter titles.

The book contains many foreign language passages mainly Latin, French, Italian, and Greek. Translations are given in footnotes at the bottom of the page. There are many literary passages presented in the book and a large number of descriptive footnotes, some of them more than one page in length.

There is a lengthy Introduction written by the editor, George Watson, which explains how Coleridge became interested in the subject and why he wrote the book. The Introduction is divided into different time periods. A Select Bibliography is presented after the Introduction and there is an Index at the end of the book which makes it easy for the reader to look up information. There is an informative Table of Contents at the beginning of the book.



## Quotes

"It has been my lot to have had my name introduced, both in conversation and in print, more frequently than I find it easy to explain, whether I find it easy to explain, whether I consider the fewness, unimportance and limited circulation of my writings, or the retirement and distance in which I have lived, both from the literary and political world" (Chapter I, pg. 1.)

"I am well aware that in advanced stages of literature when there exist many and excellent models, a high degree of talent, combined with taste and judgment and employed in works of imagination, will acquire for a man the name of a great genius, though even that analogon of genius which in certain states of society may even render his writings more popular than the absolute reality could have done would be sought for in vain in the mind and temper of the author himself" (Chapter II, pg. 20.)

"But till reviews are conducted on far other principles and with far other motives; till in the place of arbitrary dictation and petulant sneers the reviewers support their decisions by reference to fixed canons of criticism, previously established and deduced from the of nature man; reflecting minds will pronounce it arrogance in them thus to announce themselves to men of letters as the guides of their taste and judgment" (Chapter III, pg. 36.)

"In poems, equally as in philosophic disquisitions, genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission" (Chapter IV, pg. 49.)

"There have been men in all ages who have been impelled as by an instinct to propose their own nature as a problem, and who devote their attempts to its solution" (Chapter V, pg. 54.)

"The sum total of my oral and intellectual intercourse dissolved into its elements is reduced to extension, motion, degrees of velocity and those diminished copies of con figurative motion which form what we call notions, and notions of notions" (Chapter VI, pg. 69.)

"After I had successively studied in the schools of Locke, Berkeley, Leibniz and Hartley, and could find in neither of them an abiding place for my reason, I began to ask myself: is a system of philosophy, as different from mere history and historic classification, possible? If possible, what are its necessary conditions?" (Chapter IX, pg. 79.)



"I became convinced that religion, as both the corner-stone and the key-stone of morality, must have a moral origin; so far at least, that the evidence of its doctrines could not, like the truths of abstract science, be wholly independent of the will. It were therefore to be expected that its fundamental truth would be such as might be denied; though only by the fool, and even by the fool from madness of the heart alone!" (Chapter X, pg. 113.)

"But if we elevate our conception to the absolute self, the great eternal I Am, then the principle of being, and of knowledge, of idea, and of reality, the ground of existence, and the ground of the knowledge of existence, are absolutely identical. Sum Quia sum; I am, because I affirm myself to be; I affirm myself to be, because I am (Chapter VII, pg. 152.)

The answer is that nothing can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise (Chapter XIV, pg. 172)

"Nothing assuredly can differ either in origin or in mode more widely from the apparent tautologies of intense and turbulent feeling in which the passion is greater and of longer endurance than to be exhausted or satisfied by a single representation of the image or incident exciting it" (Chapter XVII, pg. 200.)

"It was a strange and curious phenomenon, and such as in Germany had been previously unheard of, to read verses in which every thing was expressed just as one would wish to talk, and yet all dignified, attractive and interesting; and all at the same time perfectly correct as to the measure of the syllables and the rhyme. It is certain that poetry when it has attained this excellence makes a far greater impression than prose" (Chapter XIX, pg. 223.)

"For a far greater number of lines would be sacrificed than in any other recent poet; because the pleasure received from Wordsworth's poems being less derived either from excitement of curiosity or the rapid flow of narration, the striking passages form a larger proportion of their value" (Chapter XX, pg. 225.)

"The poet may perhaps have passed beyond the latter, but he has confined himself far within the bounds of the former in designating these critics as too petulant to be passive to a genuine poet, and too feeble to grapple with him: men of palsied imaginations, to whose minds all healthy action is languid; who therefore feel as the many direct them, or with the many are greedy after vicious provocative" (Chapter XXII, pg. 275.)

"This has been my object, and this alone can be my defense - and O! that with this may



personal as well as my LITERARY LIFE might conclude! the unquenched desire I mean, not without the consciousness of having earnestly endeavored to kindle young minds and to guard them against the temptations of scorners by showing that the scheme of Christianity, as taught in the liturgy and homilies of our Church, though not discoverable by human reason, is yet in accordance with it; that link follows link by necessary consequence; that religion passes out of the ken of reason only where the eye of reason has reached its own horizon; and that faith is then but its continuation; even as the day softens away into the sweet twilight, and twilight, hushed and breathless, steals into the darkness" (Conclusion, pgs. 288-289.)

## Topics for Discussion

What is Coleridge's view of literary critics? How was he treated by them?

Why did Coleridge believe that a man's poetry could reveal something about the character of the man?

Why is Coleridge so concerned with the issue of perception and how the mind processes information? What does this have to do with literature?

What is the purpose of poetry according to Coleridge? How does this relate to philosophy?

What is poetic power? From what does it arise? What are the four characteristics of poetic power?

Why does Coleridge devote so much time to Wordsworth? What does he see as the source of Wordsworth's genius?

What are Coleridge's reasons for writing the book? What did he hope to accomplish?