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Engaging Dialogues: An Analysis of the Structure and Content of Coleridge's Early
Conversation Poems

by

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“Engaging Dialogues: An Analysis of the Structure and Content of Coleridge’s Early
Conversation Poems,”

Thesis Abstract - Idaho State University (2020)

In this paper, “Engaging Dialogues: An Analysis of the Structure and Content of Coleridge’s Early Conversation Poems,” I explore the concept of surrogacy within the conversation poems, debunking the idea that surrogacy implies an overpowering of individual identity, and rather arguing that the surrogates within the poems benefit from their experiences and gain value, renouncing mere instrumentality. Other scholars often perceive the surrogate as simply a literary tool that Coleridge utilizes in order to advance his own understanding and spiritual journey. I suggest that the surrogate individuals are more complex. Considering these poems through the lens of Christianity aids in productively analyzing the close link between religion and the power of language, shifting to extra-semantic ways of communicating due to the fact the surrogates are void of speech. The poetics used to mediate interaction between the speaker and the surrogate individuals create space for them to gain the capacity for a heightened awareness of God’s authoritative place in the construction and display of nature.

Key Words: Coleridge, Conversation Poems, Christianity, Surrogate, Identity

Engaging Dialogues: An Analysis of the Structure and Content of Coleridge's Early Conversation Poems

Introduction

Romantic poetry frequently traces themes of nature, imagination, and self-expression. The poets of this period often include the presence of other individuals beyond the speaker. William Wordsworth famously incorporated other individuals in his poetry, both as strangers (as in *The Prelude*) and intimate friends (as in *Tintern Abbey*). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, author of the conversation poems, takes a similar approach, creating space for relations between individuals that brings about heightened understanding. Peter Barry, in his article "Coleridge The Revisionary: Surrogacy and Structure in The Conversation Poems," discusses the complexity of the involvement of other individuals within the poems, labeling them as a sort of "surrogate self" (601). Barry states that the role of the surrogate individual within each poem is crucial in allowing the speaker to "separate the self from itself, so to speak, and effect its displaced objectification within the person of another" (602). The surrogate self assumes projected ideals and qualities of the speaker's own personality and thoughts, affording the speaker the liberty of moving beyond physical limitations into that which the mind is free to conjure.

However, Barry also claims that the conversation poems contain moments "when the surrogate's subjectivity is [...] invaded or appropriated" (610). Other critics often stand in agreement with these types of claims, framing Coleridge as self-centered and pompous concerning his treatment of others within his writing. One example of this discussion comes from Nicolas Reid's article "Coleridge: The Conversation Poems," citing that the poem's main of a fiction about how another character will react" in a given situation works to further progress Coleridge's thoughts and meditation on his own experiences (144). In Coleridge's 1797

conversation poem “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” the role of the surrogate initially appears quite problematic because of the creative liberties that Coleridge takes through the process of “self-othering” and projection (Haney 2007). Coleridge writes,

So my friend,
struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily, and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight
Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! (37-46)

At first glance, Barry’s assertion about the concept of surrogacy is justifiable, being that the surrogate’s subjectivity seems “invaded or appropriated,” but Barry’s argument overlooks the idea that surrogacy does not have to imply an overpowering of individual identity (610). Coleridge is clearly benefiting from the incorporation of the surrogate, resulting in his heightened understanding of the world around him. However, a closer look at the Christian concepts present in the conversation poems allow for the surrogate individuals to develop a heightened understanding too.

The references to Christianity within the poems challenge common understandings of the relationship between the speaker and the surrogate. I argue that, through the lens of Christianity, the speaker and surrogate individuals gain value from their respective experiences and equally

benefit, though in different ways, within the poems. Rather than viewing the surrogate as simply a narrative tool to help progress the poem or the speaker's individual ambitions, the speaker and surrogate share in a mutually beneficial experience. Each individual desires and concludes with different benefits at the end of the poems, gaining something of value.

It is useful to consider these poems through the lens of Christianity in order to productively analyze the close link between religion and the power of language, shifting to extra-semantic ways of communicating. The poetics used to mediate interaction between the speaker and the surrogate individuals, even if void of speech, create space for them to gain the capacity for a heightened awareness of God's authoritative place in the construction and display of nature. By specifically considering the structural progression and spiritual language within three of the conversation poems, "The Eolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison," and "Frost at Midnight," I move to explore the relations between the surrogate individual, religious themes, and poetic form. This will be achieved through examining illustrations of Christian concepts such as authority and counsel, connection but also individuality within a larger spiritual unity, and grace found within the conversation poems. These concepts work to grant the speaker and surrogate access to a divine character which before felt distant.

Coleridge and Christian Concepts: The Early Years

The specific relevance of Christianity to the conversation poems is often overlooked because scholars tend to think of Coleridge in the 1790's as casually Unitarian, having not yet fully explored his perspective on the intersections of philosophy and theology. These discussions are more explicit in Coleridge's later works, specifically his prose, which place the conversation poems during a time when these themes are often overlooked. However, these discussions allow

for newfound meaning with the poems, bringing spiritual language to the foreground as a way of revealing the benefits of the speaker and surrogate relationship.

It is critical to take into account Coleridge's background and beliefs during the time period the conversation poems were published. Coleridge's father was a reverend and Coleridge himself attended Jesus College, suggesting that Coleridge "not only was surrounded by the established church during his boyhood, but also *participated* in it" (Wright 44). While attending Jesus College, Coleridge prepped for his career as a Unitarian minister, receiving the Rusat scholarship that provided him with a small stipend as well as the positions of chapel clerk and librarian (Wright 44). His interest in becoming Unitarian was most likely a combination of influence from individuals in the community, the novelty of the theological position, and possibly rebellion of the status quo at the time (Wright 44).

During the 1790's when the conversation poems were published, Coleridge strongly identified with Unitarianism. As he worked to establish his philosophical and theological views, "he was trying to decide whether to be fully committed to writing or to the ministry of the gospel, and as a result, often attempted to make his poems serve a holy purpose," citing nature as the vehicle that advanced his exploration of religious themes (Gastkins 628).

"Thy more serious eye a mild reproof / darts": Authority and Counsel in "The Eolian Harp"

Published in 1796, "The Eolian Harp" presents the complexities of the intersection between the surrogate and the language used to present them. Throughout this conversation poem, Coleridge's wife Sara helps mediate the relation between the speaker and God¹. In the

¹ Coleridge's wife Sara was both historically his wife as well as a character in the poem. This integration of the poet's real world relationships remains true for the other two conversation poems as well. Charles in "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison" and The babe in "Frost at Midnight" are Coleridge's friend and child, respectively. Though

first line of the poem, Coleridge selects the word “pensive” to introduce Sara (1). This word carries connotations of engaging with deep and serious thought. “Pensive” serves to establish the poem in light of the mind’s role within the exploration that lies ahead, assigning thought to Sara, but withholding voice. Sara’s presence helps the speaker anchor his thoughts within the tangible, material world around him, soon shifting to more abstract thoughts of innocence, love, and wisdom. Coleridge describes the speaker’s physical state of being, “[a]s on the midway slope / Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon / Whilst through my half-closed eyelids I behold / The sunbeams dance,” (34-37). The posture of the speaker may seem counterintuitive due to the fact that the speaker is stretching and has “half-closed eyelids,” but the speaker is preparing to receive the nature that surrounds him, allowing “[f]ull many a thought uncalled and undetained, / And many idle flitting phantasies, / Traverse [his] indolent and passive brain” (39-40). Here, there is less of a strain to experience nature and all of its intricacies. Rather, by preparing to be receptive to his surroundings, the speaker allows nature to impress upon his mind in its own unique way, “fitting [himself] to the contours of nature” (Holstein 216). The new-found meditative state prepares him for his interactions with Sara as surrogate. Once the speaker is more receptive to his surroundings, he engages with deeper intellectual thoughts through the back and forth play of language and meditation.

The speaker’s mind is at play, exploring the wind as an “intellectual breeze” and God’s position of authority, mediating the relationship between the tangible and the imaginative². Sara prompts a stark shift in tone when her “more serious eye a mild reproof / darts,” regrounding the speaker in material thought (lines 49-50). Other scholars tend to interpret Sara as holding strict

the complexities of these relationships are historically documented, this discussion will reflect the characters as they appear within the poems.

² See John Beer’s article titled “Coleridge’s Play of Mind.”

limits of tolerance as the poem “exists wholly in the tension between Coleridge’s speculations and his sense of Sara (Fricker)’s orthodoxy” (Reid 150). As the two communicate nonverbally, however, poetics plays a pivotal role in displaying these shifting tensions.

The use of poetic devices makes the tracing of communication between the surrogate and the speaker more distinct and less strictly confrontational. In her article titled, “Pig Looks, Snake Looks: Coleridge’s Poetics of the Unsaid,” Julie Camarda establishes a difference between “talking” and “communicating” within the conversation poems. Camarda suggests, “poetry has a unique ability to communicate meaning beyond the lexical: the multisensory effects of meter, rhythm, and other formal devices facilitate the reader’s immediate involvement in either listening to or reading poetry” (335). Camarda’s claims about Coleridge’s poetry support the idea of the reading experience as grounded in sensation. So too is the communication between the speaker and Sara.

Coleridge takes this interjection of Sara’s “mild reproof” seriously, prompting him to set aside, to an extent, his intellectual thoughts and adjust his focus onto her. The speaker realizes the tension between himself and his wife and chooses to “willingly sacrifice his intellectual pursuits [for a time] to ensure domestic tranquility. Rather than alienate his new bride at the very door of the bridal cottage, he magnanimously defers to the orthodox faith of Sara, the ‘Meek daughter in the family of Christ.’” (Holstein 219). However, this encounter is more complex than Coleridge simply attempting to maintain harmony in the home. While Coleridge does benefit from the presence of Sara and her corrections that draw him back from pantheistic thought, Sara benefits from being in this situation as well as she navigates the relationship and assumes a position of influence.

Sara's authority in the poem has a strong effect on the speaker. Rather than considering her reproof as oppressive and confining, I argue that Sara exercises her authority within their marriage, renouncing mere instrumentality. Through her body language, Sara communicates to the speaker that his thoughts have deviated, and he must revert his mind back to the material to avoid straying too far from his established beliefs. The speaker claims that his beloved woman desires him to "walk humbly with my God" (line 52). This focus on humility redirects the speaker away from his wandering thoughts that "all of nature / Be but organic harps diversely framed [...] At once the Soul of each and God of All?" (lines 44-48). Sara asserts herself and provides counsel, reminding Coleridge to value humility and to not stray from his beliefs.

In the King James Version (KJV) of the bible, the book of Proverbs highlights the Christian concept of refining and encouraging one another in faith stating, "[a]s iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). Continuing with the verse's metaphor that two entities can sharpen and refine each other, one piece of iron cannot become sharper without the presence of the other. This reciprocal friction justifies and even praises Sara's actions, offering counsel and reproof, for the benefit of the other's faith. The honest critiques may grate in the short term, but the refining is mutually beneficial in the long term. This direct encounter produces conviction and results in strengthened believers. This type of counsel is encouraged in the Christian tradition and reinforces communion with others as an aspect of faith.

Acknowledging Sara's position, though not shared through the verbal exchange of language, refocuses Coleridge on the communion shared between them in a more private and intimate way. The reestablishment of communion with his family member allows Coleridge to explore his relationship with God and nature in this new way, prompted by Sara's presence. Sara's interruption of the speaker's intellectual transcendence is not a harmful act, but rather a

moment of reproof that “reminds him of the humility necessary for sacramental encounter” (Morris 65).

Sara asserts her authority through her actions, prompting Coleridge to enter into a confessional period. In “Sound, Silence and Voice in Mediation: Coleridge, Berkeley, and the Conversation Poems,” G.S. Morris claims that the raw, personal nature of the poems “in using his closest family and friends as surrogates, in often revealing himself confessionally (as is appropriate for inward, meditative prayers), is also in keeping with the aspects Coleridge found most engaging about scripture: the human, the particular, even the weak and flawed” (69). The personal nature of the poems allows Coleridge to present a more authentic self, one that struggles with Christian concepts of grace and faith. The close relation to the surrogate allows him to have these experiences. Coleridge realizes the importance of this familial communion in light of spiritual growth. Coleridge writes,

For never guiltless may I speak of him,
The Incomprehensible! Save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*;
Who with his saving mercies healed me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart honoured Maid! (lines 58-64)

In addition to the multisensory effects of the poetry, the spiritual language within the poem bridges the gap between poetry about nature and poetry which presents encounters with God. Holstein states that, “[r]eligious terminology gives special emphasis to the overmastering quality

of the experience and to the way it has completed or redeemed the poet. The new worlds opened up to him to remedy the parochial concerns and limited self that begin these poems” (Holstein 215). The speaker regrounds himself by praising God and proclaiming himself a sinful man, allowing him to surpass the limiting views he once had and to gain a newfound peace given to him by God. He concludes by appreciating the physical space that he occupies and the presence of his “heart-honoured Maid!” (line 64). Sara gains a position of influence as she provides counsel to her husband, reminding him of the value of humility as she communicates extra-
 semantically. “The Eolian Harp” highlights the value that the surrogate gains through personal experience, revealing themes of authority and counsel.

“Contemplate / with lively joy the joys we cannot share”: Finding Value through Separate Experience in “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison”

While providing counsel to one another is constructive, each individual still has separate experiences which they are able to assign value to in unrestricted ways. Coleridge’s 1797 poem “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison” presents imagination as the main tool for gaining a deeper appreciation for nature through the overcoming of physical limitations. Charles assumes the surrogate role and helps fulfill the process of employing imagination, but he is not merely an instrument which the speaker utilizes. Rather, Charles serves as an illustration of the idea that the way one encounters nature and attains insight is not prescribed.

The beginning of the poem presents the initial physical restrictions placed upon the speaker. Coleridge writes, “[w]ell, they are gone, and here I must remain, / This lime-tree bower my prison!” (lines 1-2). Due to his injury, the speaker is not able to join his friends on their nature walk. Charles and company go on to “wander in gladness” as they experience the sights and sounds of nature, leaving the speaker to rest under the lime-tree (8). This lack of physical

presence, which differs from Sara's involvement in "The Eolian Harp," presents the need for the speaker to employ imagination much more quickly in order to overcome this physical limitation. Paul Magnuson notes that "[w]hat is lost to the bodily eye is gained by the spiritual eye of imagination as it follows Charles Lamb and the Woodsworth's on their walk down into the dell and up to view the scene over the Bristol Channel" (38). This scene of physical separation situates the speaker in a limited position that in turn elicits imaginative action.

The use of poetics, specifically simile, works closely with imagination to restore the speaker's understanding and belief in that which he is unable to see. Susan J. Wolfson argues that Coleridge's use of the term blindness early in the poem, along with the physical restrictions placed on the speaker's body set the stage for "comparative syntax" to overcome these restrictions (80). The implementation of simile, specifically the words *like* and *as*, allows Coleridge to employ a sort of hypothesis presented by the speaker, drawing on resemblance of things in order to make comparisons and to overcome physical limitations. Wolfson states, "Coleridge brilliantly accommodates this peculiarity by expanding the whole figure into 'blindness' - and, by implication, inviting the compensatory acts of imagination that come into play as the visual field recedes. In this prospect of absence, negation, and invisibility, simile emerges as the agent of restoration" (80). The speaker's solitude propels him to fill the void, employing simile as a way of experiencing what his immediate senses lack.

As briefly considered in this article's introduction, there is a distinct moment when the distance between the speaker and the surrogate collapses, as the speaker uses his imagination to place himself in Charles's position. Coleridge writes, "[s]o my friend / Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood, / silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round / On the wide landscape" (lines 37-40). The speaker displays a new sympathy that overcomes space and time. The use of

as shifts the poem from “the original sensation of deprivation into a moment of spiritual participation” blurring the distinction between shared experience and projected fantasy (Wolfson 80).

This blurred distinction shifts from a connection between the two individuals to a connection between “the Almighty Spirit” and the “Spirits” of people. The full section reads “gaze till all doth seem / Less gross than bodily; and of such hues / As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes / Spirits perceive his presence” (lines 40-43). This abstraction and shift into spiritual language joins poetics in a productively ambiguous way. “Spirits” is capitalized here, but possibly merely by way of following the poem's convention of capitalizing the first letter in each line. Additionally, the word “Spirits” is plural, creating a noticeable shift from the singular “Almighty Spirit” the line prior. The close proximity of these two words, both as they appear on the page and through what they hold in common, reveals a sense of perceived connectedness. The interpretation of these lines remains ambiguous, prompting questions about the intended use of the noun, possibly revealing that the “Almighty Spirit” and the spirits of people share a unifying connection. Coleridge utilizes language here to present an assurance of the presence of a divine character, making spirits perceive his nearness. These moments of perception allow for individual experiences within a larger community of “Spirits”.

The poem reaches its climax when the speaker, through his use of imagination and Charles’ viewpoint, realizes that he holds the ability to find meaning and a spiritual connection with the nature that surrounds him under the lime-tree. Coleridge writes, “A delight / Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad / As I myself were there!” (lines 44-46). The speaker suddenly realizes that he too can find joy in the nature surrounding him. By imagining what

Charles sees, the speaker becomes aware of the fact that he can be glad in his current circumstances, not needing to see through the eyes of Charles.

Through the close relation with the surrogate, Coleridge establishes that the speaker is *like* the surrogate, but does not fully embody him. This layer of removal from the surrogate allows Charles to still benefit and find value in this experience. Rather than being overcome by the speaker, the character Charles gains from this experience, taking in the sights and sounds of nature that allow him to embrace his surroundings with his senses. The speaker acknowledges and even commends Charles for his “patient soul,” glad for his opportunity to engage with nature in this way, because he has “pined / And hungered after Nature, many a year” (lines 28-29). The speaker encourages Charles to appreciate these moments and to “employ / Each faculty of sense,” gaining the capacity to more deeply consider the connection between nature and Divine character. Engaging with the senses does not equate to a closer connection with God, but this intentional act of perception does however situate the individual to more readily experience God and think critically about nature as creation.

After the speaker realizes the value held within his current surroundings, he proclaims that Nature will not abandon those that pursue it. Coleridge affirms, “[h]enceforth I shall know / That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure; / No plot so narrow, be but Nature there, / No waste so vacant, but may well employ / Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart awake to Love and Beauty!” (Lines 59-64). The speaker gains a “renewed involvement with the landscape,” acquiring joy when he realizes his physical restrictions cannot limit God’s display of nature and his access to it (Reid 144). His limited view of God is replaced with an appreciation for his current surroundings. Rather than a longing for his past experiences and a different physical state, the speaker overcomes this barrier and encounters nature in a dynamic way.

Through employing simile and imagination, the speaker “[r]ediscover[s] his potential for sympathetic participation in the world” (Holstein 216). He more clearly recognizes the spiritual journeys of those around him and the significance of the senses to mediate moments of realization. Nature possesses a sort of irreducibility, as it resists language that would attempt to adequately represent nature and one's experience of it. Once this irreducibility is realized, a “space clears for the re-engagement with nature” now through a type of dialog and personal experience, rather than a human narrative imposed on it (Hampton 465). Morris notes that “Coleridge does not just read the written language of God, he involves himself with it” (66).

Simile and imagination also work to create separation between the speaker and Charles, presenting a sort of buffer which allows them “to attain a safe distance from the intense emotional energy of the exchange” (Camarda 337). This distance between the two individuals still allows for sympathetic exchanges, but more importantly, there is a “bolder willingness to evoke a sense of present - to submit to contingency and vexation - that refuses the safety of rational distance and deliberation” (Camarda 336). The distance allows for individual experience to remain untainted by the other's perspective or past experiences. Charles benefits from this distance, holding the ability to craft his own views and gain new appreciation for his surroundings.

Towards the end of the poem Coleridge writes “[t]is well to be bereft of promised good, / That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (lines 65-67). This concept of a shared joy serves to connect the speaker and Charles through their similar experiences. By “lift[ing] the soul”, spiritual connections and a shared joy, though different kinds of joy, maintain the ability to hold comparable but still distinct value for the individuals. As “the last rook / Beat its straight path along the dusty air,” the speaker blesses it

(line 68-69). The bird's movement and transition across the sky emphasizes the physical separation between Charles and the speaker. They have both encountered nature in different ways and the benefits they receive are individualized. The speaker demonstrates his ability to now self-regulate his intentions. In doing this, the speaker maintains the closeness of friendship and shared experience with Charles while avoiding projecting his own experience and understanding onto him. Charles experiences this shift within the poem as well. In the first half of the poem, Coleridge writes that Charles has gone "through evil and pain / And strange calamity," meaning that he carries with him experiences that have happened to him, including misfortunes that are out of his control that still shape his life (lines 31-32). After Charles' experience with nature and the opportunity to gain the capacity to experience it in a new way, Coleridge concludes the poem with a different message for Charles concerning the things of life. He writes, "[the rook] had a charm / For thee, my gently-hearted Charles, to whom / No sound is dissonant which tells of Life" (lines 74-76). Counting all sounds as harmonious that tell of life suggests that the things of life are open to interpretation, assuming a less prescriptive influence on individuals. In doing so, Charles gains value from the situation by now having the opportunity to individually process what he encountered during his walk. The speaker creates space for an individualized experience for those around him to discover God's presence in nature for themselves.

"But thou, my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze": Reading the book of Nature through grace in "Frost at Midnight"

While "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" highlights the importance of creating space for individual interpretations of experience, "Frost at Midnight" draws attention to the benefits of immersing oneself in nature. Published in 1798, "Frost at Midnight" merges themes of personal

relationships, nature, and surrogacy in order to unpack the potentially untapped spiritual understanding that lies within nature. The poem begins in a cottage as the speaker stands beside his sleeping baby. The speaker notices a piece of film by the fire that prompts him to move his mind away from the material object and to think more abstractly through imagination. The film “makes a toy of Thought” and drives the speaker to address the state of his wandering mind, reflecting on memories of his “sweet birth-place” (lines 23 & 28).

While the film “which fluttered on the grate” prompts his initial memories, it is the presence of Hartley that encourages the speaker to think more profoundly about his life thus far and nature’s hand in his ability to connect with God (line 15). Coleridge illustrates the intimacy shared between the speaker and his son: “[d]ear babe, that sleepest cradled by my side, / Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm, / Fill up the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought!” (lines 44-47). The language in these few lines reveals the harmony between the two individuals, a sense of completion and a congenial relationship. This moment displays a sense of communion between the speaker and Hartley, joining breathing and thought to suggest unity.

While the speaker and Hartley do share an intimate connection with the child’s breathing filling the gaps in the speaker's thoughts, Hartley still assumes his own identity as the poem progresses. Immediately following this moment of unity, Coleridge reestablishes Hartley’s individual identity by writing, “it thrills my heart / With tender gladness, thus to look at thee, / and think that thou shalt learn far other lore / and in far other scenes!” (Lines 48-51). Coleridge looks at Hartley as his own person, thinking about how he will experience far more than what is presently in front of him. Similar to “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,” “Frost at Midnight” presents a lack of experience and longing for a different environment as the speaker reflects on

how he was “reared / In the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim” (51-52). In lamenting his upbringing, he shifts his focus to Hartley, acknowledging the babe’s position of privilege and the experiences that the speaker hopes for in Hartley’s life.

The speaker’s past experiences help him recognize the importance of surrounding oneself with nature, allowing him to cultivate this experience for his son. Coleridge was unable to grow up surrounded by nature, which prompts his imagination to aid in the recovery of the lost experience. Coleridge writes, “But thou, my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,” (lines 54-56). The act of constructing “a fiction” about how Hartley will interact with nature inspires the speaker’s own response to the physical situation (Reid 149). Coleridge lists a few of the many features of nature, prompting readers to visualize the landscape being described. The poem achieves unity through imagery, describing “objects of nature at times as passive impressions registered on the mind, and at times in a more visionary way” (Boulger 693). Imagination unites the poem’s descriptions of nature, both active and passive, with the promptings of the mind, allowing the speaker to utilize imagination to gain a deeper understanding of the world around him.

Coleridge proclaims that the eternal language of God is nature, and the experiences that come from the “Great universal Teacher” can be better understood when one’s senses are immersed in the sights and sounds (line 63). Coleridge continues by adding, “he shall mould / Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask” (lines 63-4). This moment of interplay between mind and nature suggests a cyclical process of knowledge and the desire of experience. By knowing more about God’s creation and intentions, one will inquire more often, becoming a true student of the “great universal Teacher.” (line 63). Hartley’s upbringing will encourage him to become a true

reader of the book of nature, in a uniquely individualized way that conveys a separate experience from the speaker. Harley will “see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters, who from eternity doth teach / Himself in all, and all things in himself” (lines 58-62). Hartley’s immersion in the nature that surrounds him will translate to an ability to engage with God in a more readily available way. The concept of nature as an eternal language holds the ability to teach those that encounter it. Mark Canuel asserts that the poem’s insistent claim is,

there is an eternal language of which material objects in nature are ‘shapes and sounds intelligible’ (59). Even as lakes and mountains seem unreliable or at best mysterious as a language, the mixture of intelligibility and opacity in nature only emphasizes the degree to which the eternal language requires [...] a process of wandering, dreaming and asking (sometimes together but sometimes not) in order to understand (26).

Canuel acknowledges that the process of understanding the eternal language of nature involves a variety of steps, many of which Coleridge demonstrates throughout the conversation poems.

Not only does the distinct spiritual language point to God’s presence in nature, but the poem’s poetic language also reveals a sort of mimicry to nature’s process of sustaining life (Swanepoel 446). Coleridge brings readers into the repetitive processes of nature through the use of imagery, simile, and repetition which further illustrates the intimate relationship between humans and nature. The descriptions of nature throughout the poem often employ repetition with word order variance, but the repetition found in the first and last lines of the poem is most telling of this pattern. The “secret ministry” of the frost frames the poem and highlights the repetitive process that hints towards nature’s cycle. The opening lines read “The frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind (lines 1-2). The final few lines reiterate this by pondering “Or

if the secret ministry of frost / shall hang them up in silent icicles,” (lines 72-73). The variances in word order mimic the repetitive yet unique design of nature’s display.

Ecocritical readings of this poem work to connect the intersections of poetics and nature, closely evaluating the influence of nature on the individuals in the poem and beyond. Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno’s article “Reading, Romanticism, and Affect in Environmental Education” addresses Romantic era attitudes towards nature playing a role in discussions of environmental education (Ottum & Reno 209). “Frost at Midnight” presents a clear contrast between Coleridge’s upbringing in an urban setting and the rural education that his son will experience. Ottum and Reno also draw attention to the popular narrative that “to learn in nature is to imbibe the wisdom of ages in the language of God; to learn indoors is to endure mind-numbing confinement” (211). The article also suggests that this type of first-hand experience and immersion within a way of life helps individuals to interpret their surroundings and learn from even a portion of all that nature has to teach (Ottum & Reno 214). Coleridge and his son share a profound connection yet differing experiences, prompting an even closer reading of the complexities that this brings. Anya Taylor discusses the intimate relationship, but also the possible tensions, shared between a father and their child, citing moments in which Coleridge attempts to foretell the trajectory of Hartley’s life, potentially overstepping the confines of individual experience (37). This strong desire that Coleridge has for Hartley to experience the intricate landscapes of nature reveals an ecocritical reading that places value on nature and the potential outcome of such encounters.

While these readings highlight many crucial aspects of the poem, a specifically Christian perspective provides unique insight into the Christian concept of God’s grace towards creation and further holds the ability to expand upon moments of distinct spiritual language within the

poem, such as the pairing of nature as “that eternal language, which thy God / Utters” (lines 60-61). Emma Mason merges the discussion of poetics and the Christian concept of grace in order to argue that “[g]race lends itself to poetics because it is a form and not a substance, able to shape experience and allow for a particular kind of listening experience” (31). This meditative experience of listening and immersion points to the benefits of growing up surrounded by nature and communicating with God through this harmonious way of living. Mason continues by stating, “[r]hythm activates grace for both Coleridge and Wordsworth, the former using it as a way to shape and register the physicality of grace’s measure; the latter defining grace as a rhythmic organizing of religious experience” (32). Though grace involves movement and rhythm, it is less material and more an act of perception (30). Just as the speaker creates a fiction of Hartley’s life as a way of employing imagination, his reliance on and utilization of perception allows him to experience grace. Coleridge experiences grace through the movement, which is rooted in nature. For example, the rising and setting sun along with the in and out breathing of his child all work to display nature and allow for the experience of grace. These experiences prompt imagination to further Coleridge’s perception.

Coleridge’s views on imagination are discussed in his work *Biographia Literaria*. He writes, “[t]he primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am” (304). Perception and imagination bridge the communication and connection between the human mind and God. By situating themselves in the best position possible to utilize imagination and engage with nature, Hartley and the speaker gain personal value from this way of living.

The concepts of perception and imagination further suggest that this type of communication is rooted in individualized experience. While believers can support the spiritual

growth of those around then by providing a nurturing environment, in this instance being Coleridge who provides a life surrounded by nature for Hartley, it is individual perception and experience that allows for an encounter with grace, thus rendering the speaker and Hartley as distinctly separate and void of instrumentality.

The poetic language towards the end of the poem suggests another clear distinction between the speaker and Hartley. Coleridge writes “Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to *thee*,” hoping that Hartley has pleasant encounters with nature (line 65, emphasis added). The speaker distances himself from his son in order to recognize and be thankful for the new experience that Hartley will have on his own, taking a sympathetic stance towards his experiences. It is because Coleridge holds a deep appreciation for nature himself that Hartley will benefit from his father’s decision to raise him immersed in nature. Hartley’s upbringing presents him with an opportunity to learn to read the book of nature well, possibly even better than the speaker himself. The speaker views Hartley as his own individual person, hopeful for his future and the personal relationship that he will have by God’s grace through nature.

Conclusion

These three poems initially call into question their titles as “conversation” poems. Though dialog between individuals does not occur, other forms of communication through description and poetics allow for mutually valuable experiences between the speaker and the surrogate. Morris discusses communication alongside meditation, suggesting that there are “multi-leveled conversation[s]: external, with another human; internal, within one's self; and sacral, with God” (69). These moments of meditation can include imagination and memory, which work to strengthen understanding. The surrogate prompts imagination and memory, but this is only a small piece of their role and worth.

Surrogacy is not synonymous with identity. While surrogacy in these instances can prompt an individual to intimately relate with another, it does not suggest that the identity of the surrogate has been compromised. The surrogate still assumes individual agency and is free to process experiences as they see best fit.

The Christian concepts of authority and counsel, connection but also individuality within a larger spiritual unity, and grace further disprove the idea that the surrogate individuals are solely present to benefit the speaker, and by extension, Coleridge. Therefore, as Morris asserts, strictly secular readings of Coleridge's poetry are insufficient (60). While Morris does establish the Christian influence within the poems, he, like Barry, tends to reduce the surrogate's value to simply an individual that is of use to Coleridge and the advancement of his personal journey. I have hoped to demonstrate, through further attention to the Christian concepts within these poems, that the surrogates gain value for themselves. By employing spiritual language, Coleridge conveys nature and God in a way that displays the accessibility of God to those who are receptive to the experience. Throughout the three poems, Coleridge engages with the idea that perception and imagination are individualized experiences, revealing that there are multiple ways to be blessed by God's creation and experience grace.

In the introduction to *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge reinforces the idea of community by stating "having been taught by God's word, exemplified by God's providence, commanded by God's law, and recommended by promises of God's grace, they alone can form the foundation of a Christian community" (131). Coleridge supports Christian community and assurance in one another, aware that what individuals have been taught can strengthen a community. The surrogate individuals are critical to this concept of community. The surrogates surpass mere instrumentality, finding value and benefit in their own experiences. Each of the three poems

function differently, but they show similar, cohesive outcomes. Though many scholars view Coleridge's later works, specifically his prose, to provide clear depictions of Christian concepts, the conversation poems reveal that themes of theology and Christianity are certainly present and impactful in his early poetry as well.

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