

## Fog, mystery and folly in Coleridge and Poe

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**D**espite the fact that Samuel Coleridge (Ottery St. Mary, 1772-Highgate, 1834) and Edgar Allan Poe (Boston, 1809-Baltimore, 1849) lived and wrote in two completely different periods and countries, there are many elements from their masterpieces, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque”, that could testify a great influence of the former on the latter. Even considering their biographies, the common use of drugs could have led to similar poetics and interest for the mystery, hazy and vague atmospheres, gloomy reflections on the human conscience and his darkest and irrational component.

The setting in place, first of all, seems to be mysterious, foggy and vaguely gothic in both cases. It can be possible to highlight this point through two different description of the moonlight. Here there are some extracts from Coleridge’s poetry work:

*In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,  
It perched for vespers nine;  
Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,  
Glimmered the white moon-shine.*

The refrains and assonances of the first line contributes to paint, in front of the reader’s eyes, the desolate picture of a moonlight on the sea. Poe, as well, creates this effect of “densification”, describing a similar scene in “The fall of the house of Usher”:

*[...] yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars, nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.*

The effect, moreover, seems to be even more realistic. The amount of adjectives adds more colours, more details to Coleridge’s moonlight and the effect is the one wanted by Poe: mesmerise the reader and profound a deep, irrational terror in him.

However, their interest in undefined is not the only common element between their works. As it could have been already noticed, both Coleridge and Poe choose their adjectives from the same semantic area: *mist* and *fog-smoke white* for the first, *agitated vapour* and *visible gaseous exhalation* for the second; the two verbs to *glimmer* and to *glow* have even the same root. They booth use sound devices such as refrains, repetitions, alliterations and exclamations. As examples, here there are other significant passages:

*The ice was there, the ice was there,  
The ice was all around;  
[...]*

And from “The Tell-Tale heart”:

*You should have seen how wisely I proceeded- with what caution- with what foresight- with what dissimulation I went to work!*

And yet, for the use of exclamation, in order to increase the anxiety in the reader, Coleridge’s Mariner yells:

*God save thee, ancient Mariner!  
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!*

While Poe's anonymous narrator raves:

*I felt that I must scream or die! And now- again!- bark! Louder! Louder! Louder! Louder!*

Having analyzed the common language peculiarities, other many aspects claim the attention. The poor or totally absent description of the main character (Coleridge and Poe never go in details), their dark auras and their condition of outcast, their physical isolation (the mariner sails in a spectral and remote sea, Usher lives in a perched manor): all this elements contribute to create a link between the two authors.

Above all, their thrilling actions, their cruelty without any reason. The mariner shoots the Albatross, a symbol of salvation and spiritual purification, God and the balance of natural world. The main character of "The Tell-Tale heart" unreasonably kills his old caretaker. Both with any regret, any awakening of the conscience. On the contrary, with a frightening coldness and lucidity. They both narrate their crimes to someone (the mariner stops a guest during a wedding, the anonymous speaks directly to the reader) in order to remember and analyze it. In the end, they both show the dark side of human madness, the uncontrollability of his impulses.

What seems to change, in a great shift, is the hope of redemption, of a final liberation: the old mariner finally understands his cruelty and warns the guest about the sacredness of natural balance in God, taking himself as an example of its break; Poe's madman remains stuck in his folly, sinks in it every minute more. It seems correct to deduce that Poe has been influenced by Coleridge in many ways, except for his faith in God, the only key to justify and correct human unconscious errors. Poe, as his characters, hasn't got a *good way* on which return. The obsession absorbs him completely.