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Coleridge, James and the Dangerous Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

British Romanticism and the American gothic are often treated as separate literary entities, the former focusing on the events of real life and the latter toward the surreal or supernatural. Many of the elements found in the American gothic, however, had their foundations in British Romanticism. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's relationship to the supernatural and the imagination were an inspiration to generations of American writers.

Although Samuel Taylor Coleridge's early poetry was not popular during his time, his incorporation of the supernatural influenced American gothic writers by introducing the power of the unknown. Coleridge recognized that the supernatural had a mesmerizing effect that naturally captivated readers and noted that the "semblance of truth [was] sufficient to procure ... [a] willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (Coleridge 314). The reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" gives the supernatural its influential power. A reader becomes captivated by a story, and without the proper judgment, a reader becomes impassioned by the vast potential of the imagination. For this reason, Coleridge advocated for separating the imagination from reality because he believed that the imagination had a dangerous corruptive power. Coleridge recognized that an uncontrolled imagination had the ability to fragment the memory and charm the reader to the point of obsession. Because of this concern, Coleridge became hesitant about his supernatural poetry later in life, but his influence on the Romantic Movement inspired American gothic writers like Edgar Allen Poe, and later Henry James, to explore the horror that arises from manipulating the imagination.

In Coleridge's poetic theory, the imagination is essential to poetic genius, but he believed that this poetry should remain inaccessible to the uneducated because they are more likely to become mesmerized by the potency of the imagination, especially when combined with the

supernatural. Coleridge feared that by combining the mesmerizing qualities of the supernatural with reality, uneducated readers would find it impossible to differentiate between what is real and what is elaborated by the imagination. To Coleridge, the imagination is a complex entity, which he divides into primary and secondary. Coleridge declares that the primary imagination is “the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and ... the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am” and that the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” (Coleridge 313). This division of the imagination into “primary” and “secondary” components creates a distinction between the initial creation of imaginative thought and reproduction of that thought by the conscious will into language. Coleridge believed that if the conscious will was not strong enough to harness the imagination then it would overwhelm the reader and become a corruptive and dangerous power.

Though Coleridge abandoned his supernatural poetry later in life and left poems such as “Kubla Khan” and *Christabel* unfinished, his impact on the Romantic Movement was revived by the Gothic genre. Edgar Allan Poe even credits Coleridge in his “Letter to B_____” as a “giant in intellect and learning” (Poe 394), even stating in Coleridgean style, “of Coleridge, I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect! his gigantic power!” (396). Poe adopts many stylistic techniques that Coleridge uses in his poetry, but unlike Coleridge, Poe intends to intensify the passions of the reader by incorporating the possibility of the supernatural or uncanny. For instance, Poe adopts Coleridge’s use of repetitive images and symbols in his poetry, but while Coleridge keeps a firm distinction between the real and the imaginary, Poe seeks to explore the hysteric response and horror created from transforming an ordinary object into something supernatural. Although Poe channels Coleridge in his poetry, he criticizes Coleridge’s poetic theory and his need to explain and rationalize the imagination.

In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge attempts to define the imagination and its operative power in poetry, but Poe suggests in his “Letter to B_____” that Coleridge fails to understand the imagination because the imagination escapes all rationalization. Poe compares Coleridge’s error to the contemplation of a star where, “he who regards it directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray — while he who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below — its brilliancy and its beauty” (Poe 394). Poe, like other American gothic writers, manipulates the imagination in order to heighten the passion of the reader. Coleridge feared that by introducing this passion to uneducated readers, the imagination would overwhelm them and cause a dangerous disconnect with reality. The writers of the American gothic blur the lines between reality and the imaginary by incorporating the possibility of the supernatural in realistic settings or situations. Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* flawlessly encompasses this gothic ideal by manipulating the imagination to enhance the uncanny effect of the story, yet it also echoes Coleridge’s advocacy for restraint.

Born in the United States, raised and educated in Europe, Henry James’ identity as a writer spans between British Realism and the American gothic. His novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, uniquely draws on the American gothic tradition by focusing on the mental anguish that stems from the supernatural. James’ intricately incorporates the supernatural with reality, and he uses the reader’s willingness to believe in a supernatural story to design a more sophisticated horror story. Echoing Coleridge’s fascination with the supernatural, James elicits the unknown and demonstrates its effect on ordinary people. The reader, like his characters, suspend their disbelief of the supernatural long enough to become captivated by the story. James aims to obscure the reader’s ability to interpret *The Turn of the Screw* because the power of his story lies

in its perfect ambiguity. If the reader rationalizes the supernatural elements of the story, the impact of *The Turn of the Screw* would be reduced to a question of madness. Instead, James enhances the unknown by abruptly ending his story and leaving the reader to imagine all the possibilities. In a similar manner, Coleridge tends to leave his readers without an explanation for the supernatural elements in his poetry and leaves the reader seeking closure. In a review of the novels of contemporary writer Ann Radcliffe, Coleridge “was disappointed by the rational endings that Radcliffe... used to explain away her novels’ supernatural events” (Mudge 183). Coleridge, who had difficulty concluding his supernatural poems, seems to resist rationalizing the supernatural, yet is not confident enough to expose his readers to the bounds of possibility.

In his early poetry, Coleridge demonstrates the need to restrain the dangerous effect of the imagination when it attempts to overstep its bounds into reality. Despite his concerns, he incorporates the supernatural in his poetry and introduces the influential power of the unknown to the Romantic Movement. American gothic writers, like Edgar Allen Poe, disregarded Coleridge’s apprehension of the imagination’s influence and used the power of the unknown to delve deep into the imagination’s horrific potential. Henry James, however, sought a balance between Coleridge’s thoughts on the dangers of the imagination and Poe’s embellished manipulation of the imagination. James’ recognized the need to restrain the imagination, but instead of fearing that the imagination had a corruptive and dangerous power, James believed that an uncontrolled imagination could compromise the “virtue of the story” (James 119). Coleridge’s poetry influenced many of the distinctive elements of the American gothic, and combined with the mesmerizing effect of the supernatural, Coleridge’s fascination and concern over the effect of the imagination is reexamined in American gothic literature, culminating in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*.

CHAPTER 1:

APPLYING THE DANGERS OF IMAGINATION TO LITERATURE – IMAGINATION'S TRANSFORMING POWER

Coleridge's strained attempt to define the functions of the imagination in *Biographia Literaria* suggests the extraordinary power he ascribes to creativity. Even having divided it into the primary imagination, secondary imagination and fancy – which will be discussed later –, Coleridge constantly struggled with his inability to fully understand its constitution and power. In its raw form, the imagination is a force too powerful to be reduced to finite language, and it seems to constantly resist Coleridge's attempts to do so. According to Patricia Jenkins, "Coleridge was making two important observations: imagination must be coupled with conscious thought to become fully operative; this shadowy state of imagination goes astray without the aid of judgment" (194). Without the constraints of the will and the clarity of an educated mind, the imagination has the potential to be construed into a dangerous mode of enticement or delusion. Coleridge continues to wrestle with the concept of the imagination because he believes that unless it is mastered and harnessed, it can become dangerous, particularly if imaginative literature is encountered by an uneducated mind.

Throughout his life, Coleridge approached the art of poetry with trepidation because he believed that the poetic imagination's connection to the infinite allowed him to affect others in a potentially dangerous manner. In *Biographia Literaria*, he mentions that his conversations with Wordsworth frequently turned to "the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the

interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination” (Coleridge 314). Wordsworth, who devotes himself to the first cardinal point of poetry, is a poet of nature, while Coleridge, who devotes himself to the second, is a poet of the supernatural. Where Wordsworth finds “truth in nature” by writing about subjects “chosen from ordinary life” (314), Coleridge diverges from his friend by finding poetic truth in the depths of the imagination. In his early work, Coleridge concentrates on the second cardinal point of poetry where “the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in... the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real” (314). Coleridge was more interested in how the imagination accentuates the passions of the reader, and he finds dramatic truth in delusion. In “Kubla Khan”, he departs from the ordinary by focusing on the fantastical experience derived from a dream, and establishes the divine and dangerous qualities of the imagination.

Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” expresses the boundless emotions of the speaker when he glimpses a world of profound imagination. With only a glance into an unseen world, the speaker is overwhelmed by his emotions and cries out a warning to the reader, “Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” (49-50). The speaker’s passions become more apparent as he tries to seize control of his vision, yet rather than conquering his enthusiasm, he is once again drawn into a state of delusion. Coleridge’s theory of a divine yet dangerous imagination is established as the speaker continues, “close your eyes with holy dread, / For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise” (52-54). This assertion claims that the speaker has experienced a glimpse of the infinite imagination, and as a result, he can no longer return to ordinary life. The speaker’s experience of the imagination consumes him, and his warning acts as a barrier between his delusional state of mind and the impressionable reader.

Coleridge uses “Kubla Khan” as both an exploration of the depths of the imagination and a warning of the imagination’s overwhelming power. In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge specifically remarks on the incredible power of the imagination and how uneducated people are dangerously exposed to it through secondhand sources:

The best part of the human language, properly called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary approbation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of the imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed or reaped. (Coleridge 342)

In Coleridge’s theory, the uneducated man is not meant to harness the imagination because he does not have the means to understand or express it properly. The uneducated are impressionable, so when they attempt to repeat what they do not understand, the original imaginative thought is transformed by the enthusiasm of the reader. Jon Mee notes the distinction between enthusiasm and imagination by observing that the former appears when “a prophetic figure... threatens to bring his own vision of the divine immediately before the public” (para. 19). When the imagination is coupled with man’s own vision, especially that of an uneducated man, then the power of the imagination is dangerously channeled by that man’s will, who gains the power to enchant and deceive.

Coleridge worried that unless the secondary imagination tempered the primary imagination by asserting conscious will over infinite thought, readers would not be able to differentiate between what is real and what is developed by the imagination. He declares, “we

are restless because invisible things are not the objects of vision; and metaphysical systems, for the most part, become popular, not for their truth, but in proportion as they attribute to causes a susceptibility of being seen, if only our visual organs were sufficiently powerful” (Coleridge 213). The allure of the imagination is not “truth” but its powerful ability to reveal the unknown. Coleridge feared that an uneducated individual exposed to imaginative literature, would be unable to understand the unknown and would enter an obsessive search for truth. Those who could not understand imaginative literature could construct their own visions of “truth”, which are often partial and deceptive. For this reason, Coleridge advocated for separating the imagination from reality in order to create a barrier between the reader and the divine. He believed that to the uneducated mind the imagination had a corruptive power that could fragment memory and charm the reader to the point of madness.

Coleridge stressed the importance of controlling the imagination through conscious will, and attempted to articulate the power of the imagination through his poetry. He feared, however, that by combining the mesmerizing qualities of the imagination with reality, an individual could become fixated on the imagination and lose their sense of reality. When a poet attempts to articulate the imagination through language, he uses repetitive, rhythmic language and specific phrases that morph the reader’s overall understanding of the poem. Even with the conscious will, the poet can never fully replicate the imagination through poetic language, and instead, he mesmerizes the reader with the imagination’s potential. Coleridge insists that the imagination must be harnessed by the will, yet he also warns that “the will itself by confining and intensifying the attention may arbitrarily give vividness or distinctiveness to any object whatsoever” (Coleridge 223). Interestingly, this particular function of the will transforms

ordinary objects or occurrences into something eerie or supernatural, which dangerously combines the imaginary with reality to produce an uncanny effect.

Much later, Sigmund Freud, the great psychoanalyst, wrote “The ‘Uncanny’ (1919)” to explore the relationship between the human mind and the supernatural. He explains that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes” (15). Though they are writing more than one hundred years apart, Coleridge and Freud both recognize the effect of the supernatural on the impressionable mind. In his early poetry, Coleridge tended to separate the supernatural from reality because he feared the uncanny effect, which he termed the fancy in his theory of the imagination. Coleridge’s idea of the fancy mirrors the uncanny effect because the fancy allows the mind to focus on vivid or repetitive details that have the ability to alter one’s perception of reality.

Concerned about the limitations of the human mind, Coleridge emphasizes that poetic imagination should be kept separate from reality, yet authors such as Edgar Allen Poe and Henry James combined the imagination with reality to enhance the uncanny effect. In his preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, James echoes Coleridge’s fascination and anxiety over the influence of the imagination on readers, yet unlike Coleridge, James expresses an intention to use the manipulative power of the imagination. Reflecting on his process, James writes: “make the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough ... and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself” (James 123). While Coleridge recognized that the imagination is dangerous to uneducated minds

because they will fixate and obsess over details in an attempt to understand it, James allowed the reader's imagination to fill the particulars of the story. For this reason, *The Turn of the Screw* reveals more questions than answers in the end. James makes it unclear whether the reader is witnessing the mental anguish of the governess or a succession of events that should be considered real.

In his early poetry, Coleridge was particularly interested in delusion and the effects of the supernatural on the human mind. His interest in delusion paired with the supernatural is evident in both "Kubla Khan" and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a means to reach the inaccessible imagination. Paul Fry contends that "it was Coleridge and Coleridge alone who was interested in the 'delusion' of 'supernatural agency' because he believed, and wanted to prove to Wordsworth, that 'dramatic truth' could be arrived at only through the conduit of this delusion" (28).

Coleridge rejects the idea that this 'dramatic truth' can be achieved by ordinary experience alone and views delusion and the supernatural as channels of transcendence. Interestingly, Coleridge's portrayal of delusion in his poetry often shows how delusion can lead one to madness or false divine revelations instead of revealing the truth at the heart of imagination. In Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner relates his traumatic experience with exact expertise, yet his tale noticeably reflects his hysteric mentality, a theme that is notable throughout the American gothic. The Mariner survives the hot sun and quenchless thirst unlike many of his crewmates and develops an irrational impulse to spread his horrifying tale:

Since then, at an uncertain hour

That agony returns:

And till my ghastly tale is told,

This heart within me burns. (582-585)

The Mariner's self-proclaimed mastery over his own story also prevents him from escaping his curse because he always expresses the same tale while failing to find its significance. His inability to provide a satisfactory meaning to his tale causes him to return to the same void rather than reaching transcendence.

Although Coleridge believed that delusion acts as a channel towards understanding the imagination, it also tends to disfigure the imagination because it is often paired with a hysteric response to a traumatic experience. Patricia Jenkins explains that "the imagination has been centrally involved in the confusion between the dream and the outer world and in the terror that results from such confusion" (195). This concept is also dominant in the American gothic where the lines between the imaginary and the real are often blurred, which leaves the reader to question what is reliable. Most notably, Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* presents a character of uncertain sanity that becomes consumed by the image of an eye and the beating of a heart. Freud explains in "The 'Uncanny' (1919)" that the uncanny effect is often produced when something familiar is transformed by morbid anxiety into something horrific (13), and that "psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all" (15). In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator's imagination transforms the ordinary image of an eye into a terrifying object of unrest: "It was open – wide, wide open – and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness – all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones" (Poe 503-504). The old man's eye is unusual but not supernatural, and it is evident that the narrator's fixation on the eye is what leads him to madness. The narrator distorts the repetitive image of the eye in his mind, and his imagination transforms his perception of an

ordinary eye into an “Evil Eye” (Poe 502). When the line between reality and the imaginary is crossed, the imagination can lead to madness.

Coleridge feared that imagination, when unrestrained, could alter the truth beyond recognition, a fear from which both Edgar Allen Poe and Henry James departed. Their gothic stories thrived on the uncertainty of truth through unreliable or hysteric narrators. The hysteric narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* and the questionable narration of the governess frequently cross the boundary between imagination and reality, so that instead of the mind understanding reality through the imagination, reality is warped by the imagination.

Poe exaggerates the transforming effect of the imagination, but by doing so, he emphasizes the experience of delusion in the form of hysteria. *The Tell-Tale Heart* is based entirely on the narrator’s hysteric response to a repetitive image obscured in his mind, yet he asks the reader, “and now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses?” This indicates that although the narrator recognizes that he may appear insane, he believes or wants to believe that everything he does is rational. As he meticulously describes his actions, he explains his reasoning and motives behind everything. He is trying to either convince the reader or convince himself that he has not slipped into madness, just as the ancient Mariner maintains that his supernatural tale is rooted in reality. Both speakers share their tale with such potent enthusiasm that they mesmerize the reader, not because they speak the truth but because they withhold closure. In the *Biographia*, Coleridge intended “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (314). The reader’s “willing suspension of disbelief” allows the imagination to mesh with reality seamlessly and leaves the reader searching for meaning.

While Coleridge indicates that the imagination can be accessible through a form of carefully controlled delusion, the American gothic explores the possibilities of intertwining the imagination with stark reality. James' *The Turn of the Screw* combines the effect of repetitive storytelling and the indefinite elements of the supernatural to create a mesmerizing combination of imagination and reality. Both *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* incorporate elements of the supernatural, but somehow the governess' seamless incorporation of the supernatural into the real world makes her tale more reliable. Despite our skepticism about the supernatural, our confidence in both storytellers builds as they become more passionate about their tales. Our willingness to believe distorts our natural vision of the story guided by these misguided narrators.

The governess narrates her story by reconstructing the events by memory and focusing on key elements that make her story sound more reliable, especially concerning the existence of the ghosts. This narrative style can be understood through what Coleridge calls "fancy", which he defines as "a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will" (313). The fancy focuses on vivid or repetitive details that become memorable or easy to recall, yet by doing so, the human mind creates a fragmented or partial version of the truth. As the story of *The Turn of the Screw* unfolds, the governess sees the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss. Jessel, yet she fully relies on Mrs. Grose and her own imagination to develop the truth behind their existence. As the reader, we rely on the governess' testimony and tend to attribute credibility to her tale even though she is skeptical about her own experience. At the beginning of her tale, the governess admits, "I scarce know how to put my story into words that shall be a credible picture of my state of mind" (James 51). Although the governess warns the reader about her doubts, the reader tends to accept

her authority as credible, and she procures a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 314) from the reader.

Coleridge uses both “Kubla Khan” and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a warning of the mesmerizing effect of the imagination, yet James uses the imagination to distort and distract from the ordinary. In the preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, James admits that his inspiration for the novella came from a true story, yet he was not interested in telling the truth behind the story. Instead, James valued “the immense merit of allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand, of inviting it to act on a perfectly clear field, with no ‘outside’ control involved, no pattern of the usual or the true or the terrible ‘pleasant’ ... to consort with” (James 118). Though James describes storytelling as a way to free the reader’s imagination from all constraint, *The Turn of the Screw* is a meticulously structured novella. The structure of the story is what gives the reader’s imagination this freedom. James ultimately leaves it up to the reader to find meaning in the governess’ tale, which is why it is never clear whether the ghosts exist because then the reader would be subject to only one interpretation of the story.

Manipulating the imagination tends to obscure our perception of reality, which is what James intends to accomplish in *The Turn of the Screw*. Like Coleridge, however, James sees the need to channel the imagination through the conscious will and deliberate understanding. Similar to Coleridge’s warning of the dangers of the imagination presented in “Kubla Khan”, in the preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, James warns of the imagination’s ability to consume a story:

Nothing is so easy as improvisation, the running on and on of invention; it is sadly compromised, however, from the moment its stream breaks bounds and gets into flood. Then the waters may spread indeed... wrenching off for our amusement, the whole face of the land – only violating by the same stroke our sense of the

course and the channel, which is our sense of the uses of a stream and the virtue of a story. (119)

James indicates that the imagination can easily overpower the story, but with deliberate structure and intentions, he is able to intertwine the imagination with reality without losing the “virtue of the story”. For this reason, the reader becomes enthralled by the governess’ story until the very end where the story loses all structural integrity and ends abruptly. In a reaction to the end of the novella, John Pearson suggests that “her silence, a gap in her narrative, opens up a great hole to the flood of imagination that, James says in the preface, violates ‘our sense of the uses of the stream and the virtue of a story’” (283). Caused by a fluctuation of the imagination, the highly debated ending to the *Turn of the Screw* leaves readers confused and searching for meaning to fill the void.

Coleridge’s relationship to the supernatural expressed in his early poetry was an inspiration to some of the greatest American writers. His fascination with the power of the imagination was tempered by the fear of its corrupting influence in the wrong hands, and in the *Biographia Literaria*, he urges caution and restraint when combining supernatural elements with reality. By contrast, Poe and James deliberately use these supernatural elements and structure their stories to amplify the imagination and to blur the line between delusion and reality. Through the subjectivity of their narrators, these writers of the American gothic seamlessly integrate the supernatural with events that we presume to be true, which, to Coleridge, is exploiting the dangerous imagination.

CHAPTER 2:

THE STORYTELLER'S MESMERIZING EFFECT

In his early poetry, Coleridge focuses on the mesmerizing effect of the imagination and demonstrates how it can dangerously compromise the reader's conscious will. Throughout Coleridge's work, compelling narrators use the supernatural to appeal to their audience, tapping into this quality of the imagination. Poets and writers of the American gothic, from Edgar Allan Poe to Henry James, also adopt this relationship to the supernatural in their narratives. The reader is compelled by the possibility of the supernatural that gives each story its mesmerizing power. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Turn of the Screw*, the mariner and the governess respectively attempt to give their story concrete meaning by explaining and harnessing the supernatural elements. Because their stories defy a straightforward explanation, however, each narrative ends with powerful ambiguity, which leads to their compulsion to retell the story in the search for meaning.

Each storyteller attempts to harness the imagination and explain supernatural and fail to recreate a true impression of their story because they try to shape the imagination into identifiable parts. In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge makes a distinction between the imagination and the fancy by defining the fancy as a "mode of memory" that is "modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice" (Coleridge 313). The fancy is a focus on the narrator's ability to shape his perception of the imagination by using repetition and association. The narrator of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* chooses to fixate on the Mariner's "glittering eye" (12) in order to convey the potency of the Mariner's storytelling

that uncannily forces the wedding guest to listen: “The wedding-guest sat on a stone: / He cannot choose but hear” (16-17). Although the narrator’s contributions to the Mariner’s tale seem insignificant, his commentary focuses the reader’s attention to the mesmerizing power of the Mariner’s supernatural tale. Coleridge’s fancy allows the mind to focus on vivid or repetitive details that become memorable and easy to recall, yet by doing so, the memory creates a fragmented version of the truth. Ashley Miller argues that “Coleridge’s own theory of memory seems to allow for the despotism of the inward impression – the ability of a fragmented memory to become independently active” (33). Although the Mariner claims to have witnessed supernatural events, he prefers to retell his story by focusing on symbols, like the Albatross, as a way to explain the supernatural. The Mariner’s compulsion to repeat his story modifies his original memory to incorporate these explanations and demonstrates how the will can transform a genuine experience into an artificial memory.

Instead of understanding Mariner’s tale as a whole, the narrator can only return to the fragmented impression of his experience. Rather than retelling the story as he heard it, the narrator focuses on the presence of the Mariner and “his glittering eye”, which indicates that the effect of the Mariner holds more significance than the story he intends to tell. The Mariner infects the narrator with his story and causes “the propensity for repetition” which “does not end with the mariner: the narrator of *The Rime* is also possessed by it, and phrases are repeated verbatim throughout the text” (Miller 49). When the Mariner creates a source of continuous repetition through his own repetitive phrases or images, the narrator adopts the same style to recreate his impression of the Mariner. He introduces the Mariner as a “grey-beard loon” which causes the reader to question the Mariner’s reliability as a storyteller, but as the Mariner delves deeper into his tale, his reliability is no longer essential to the poem. The reader tends to forget

the initial frame that the narrator creates and becomes mesmerized by the Mariner's tale just like the wedding guest. Coleridge demonstrates the extent of the Mariner's mesmerizing abilities by placing deliberate interruptions within the Mariner's tale. After the Mariner describes the cursed shooting of the Albatross, Coleridge interjects the Mariner's tale with a cry from the wedding guest: "I fear thee, ancient Mariner! / ... / I fear thee and thy glittering eye!" (224-228). This interruption immediately breaks the Mariner's mesmerizing power and temporarily reminds the reader of the context of the poem. The wedding guest's fixation on the Mariner's "glittering eye" refers to the beginning of the poem when the narrator focuses on the Mariner's presence and attempts to develop skepticism around the Mariner's tale.

Coleridge deliberately reminds the reader of the narrator's initial impression of the Mariner because it would be dangerous to allow the Mariner's imagination to dominate the rest of the poem without some restraint. He sees the need to place a barrier between the reader and the Mariner's powerful imagination for the same reason that the narrator of "Kubla Khan" warns the reader, "Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!" (48-49). In the same way, Coleridge demonstrates how the Mariner is affected by a dangerous form of the imagination because he fixates on recreating his unnatural experience. Unlike the narrator of "Kubla Khan", however, the Mariner spreads his burden with disregard to the outer world:

I pass, like night, from land to land;
 I have strange power of speech;
 That moment that his face I see,
 I know the man that must hear me:
 To him my tale I teach. (584-590)

Like a ghost, the Mariner separates himself from the context of reality and disrupts the lives of others by passing along the burden of his tale. The Mariner's potent voice is an extension of Coleridge's theory of the fancy, where the Mariner's will to spread his tale is magnified by his charisma and quality as a storyteller. The Mariner's motivation to spread his tale is clear as he tries to ease his burden, but it is not clear whether the Mariner's tale is based on real supernatural elements or a descent into madness. Patricia Jenkins explains that "Although Coleridge likens the imagination to mania in the *Biographia* in order to heighten its distinction from fancy which he links with delirium, he does not directly assert ... that imagination without 'the check of senses and the reason would actually *become* mania" (198). Although the Mariner tells a supernatural tale, the reader tends to doubt the Mariner's interpretation of his tale rather than his inclusion of the supernatural. The Mariner's dependency on the fancy when retelling his tale indicates that he is sinking into delirium instead of enhancing his imagination.

In an attempt understand his own traumatic experience, the Mariner recreates his memory with each repetition to fit more appropriately with his own interpretation of events. The Mariner suspects that he is cursed to spread his tale because God is punishing him for killing one of his creatures, an Albatross. Because of his wrongdoing, the Mariner is overcome by his burden to teach his tale in hopes of redemption, so he leaves the reader with a disappointing universal interpretation:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (614-617)

Although the Mariner suggests that he knows the meaning behind his tale, his attempt to redeem himself in the eyes of God is futile as he is still cursed to spread his burden. Expressing doubt on the Mariner's conclusion, Peter Larkin explains that, "we do not actually know whether the Mariner is telling us the truth of how his tale convulses him with the need to repeat it, and we easily forget that this claim (which we do take seriously) occurs as part of the weak or Christianing conclusion we tend not to take seriously (146-147). When the Mariner fails to provide satisfactory closure, he leaves the reader aching for meaning and contributes to the repetition compulsion, which attempts to fill that void. Because of the ambiguity of understanding the supernatural, it resists interpretation and instead mesmerizes the reader by its possibility, which is a concept that Henry James explores more thoroughly in *The Turn of the Screw*.

Like Coleridge's Mariner, the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is not the narrator of her own story. Although the governess' story is told from her perspective through a written account of events, her story is also told by a character named Douglas whose motivations to tell the tale could compromise the truth of her entire story. Douglas intends to compete with the compelling qualities of other ghost stories being told around a fire. The narrator describes how the exchange of ghost stories gripped an audience in the introduction: "The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be" (James 21). This introduction indicates that the Douglas' audience is interested in the supernatural and are willing to suspend their disbeliefs in exchange for a good story. Because of the other gripping ghost stories told earlier, Douglas shares that he can challenge all of the previous stories with one involving two children and entices his audience by stating, "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite

too horrible” (James 22). Here, Douglas frames the governess’ story as a horrible ghost story, and secures the proof of the tale from the governess’ manuscript. To make the story even more complex, however, the primary narrator of the *Turn of the Screw* is not Douglas, but rather a mysterious, nameless person who is part of Douglas’ audience the first time he tells the governess’ tale. Before reciting the foundation of the governess’ tale, the narrator explains that “the narrative [Douglas] had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue. Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I presently give” (James 25). This indicates that not only is this story told after the governess’ death, it also is a reproduction of Douglas’ original tale, which infected the narrator with the need to repeat it. The narrator recreates the governess’ powerful tale as a transcript after both the death of the governess and Douglas, and in this manner, the narrator combines the governess’ initial experience, Douglas’ impression of the tale and an independent perspective of events to form a compelling tale.

What sets the narrator’s story apart from the rest, however, is that this ghost story is intricately connected with reality and thus more believable. Since Douglas reads from a manuscript written by the governess after a time of reflection, the reader is provided with a restricted view of events. Her original sensations of fear or helplessness become diluted through the form of written text, which is further diluted each time Douglas retells the story. When a guest asks, “And is the record yours? You took the thing down?” Douglas responds, “Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*’ he tapped his heart. ‘I’ve never lost it” (James 23). This suggests that Douglas adds his own impression to the retelling of the governess’ tale and that as a good storyteller, he might enhance certain qualities to transfer his initial impression onto his audience. Although *The Turn of the Screw* never returns to Douglas after he begins reading the

governess's tale, Douglas frames the story in suspense and creates expectations that entrance his audience. The narrator grounds the governess' story in reality by explaining her mundane circumstances rather than beginning with the supernatural occurrences that might spark doubt. He describes the fleeting emotions of a young woman and the true responsibilities of a governess: "She was young, untried, nervous: it was the vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness" (James 27). Unlike Coleridge's narrator who presents the Mariner as a "grey-beard loon" (11), the governess is presented as a reliable source who happened upon dire circumstances. The reliability of the governess allows the audience to believe in the possibility of the supernatural and resist alternative interpretations of events because they want to believe her version of events.

Because Douglas simultaneously presents the governess's story as a ghost story and a true story, the reader willingly dispels any doubts about the supernatural despite our proper judgment. The reader becomes mesmerized by the governess' supernatural tale, and at times regains a sense of doubt, when Mrs. Grose reveals her inability to see the apparitions or when we are left mystified when the novel comes to its jolting conclusion. It is notable that during crucial points of *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess relies on her belief that others' eyes are "sealed" from seeing the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss. Jessel, yet the governess's own blindness drives her continuously towards compulsive interpretations. When the governess leads Mrs. Grose in the search for Flora under the unfounded assumption that Flora is with Miss. Jessel, the reader learns that Mrs. Grose cannot see the devious apparition. The governess is the only one to claim to see these apparitions, and unfortunately for her credibility, when the apparition of the Miss Jessel is so fearfully obvious, Mrs. Grose's "eyes were hopelessly sealed" and Flora fervently denies seeing anything: "I see nobody. I see nothing. I never *have*. I think you're cruel.

I don't like you!" (99). The governess sees no other explanation to this occurrence other than that Mrs. Grose's eyes are sealed and that Flora is a "vulgarly pert little girl" (99) rather than question her own vision. Because her memory is completely framed by the existence of the ghosts and her obsession with the proof of their existence, the governess is blind to ordinary explanations for what she sees. Due to her obsession, the governess interprets everything the children do as an act of deception or distraction. For instance, when Flora goes missing, Miles diverts the governess's attention with music, and she admits, "under his influence I had quite ceased to measure I started up with a strange sense of having literally slept at my post . . . I had forgotten. Where all this time was Flora?" (93). Since the reader is only presented with the governess' perspective, we have the willingness to believe that the children are purposely trying to evade the governess from catching them with Peter Quint or Miss. Jessel. The reader is coaxed into believing the governess because she is our only reliable source of information and, thus far, she seems to reach reasonable conclusions. In her certainty and energy to prove what she believes true, she neglects her duties as governess because, ironically, her intent to save the children consumes her.

Because the governess narrates her own tale, her will to prove that the apparitions exist and that the children are active participates in the haunting seems to overpower the reality of the situation. In Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Marnier*, the will also plays a vital part in storytelling. Not only does Coleridge suggest that the will is something "we express with word choice"(313) in the *Biographia*, he also emphasizes that the Marnier takes the wedding guest's will away from him in order to mesmerize with his tale:

He holds him with his glittering eye—

The wedding-guest stood still

And listens like a three years' child

The Mariner hath his will. (13-16)

The Mariner uses his potent voice to draw the wedding guest and the narrator away from the wedding and into his own world of representation. Even though the wedding guests resist the Mariner's story, "he cannot choose but hear" (Coleridge 17) because the Mariner "casts a spell on the wedding guest who thereafter cannot avoid listening; the mariner 'hath his *will*' reducing the wedding guest to little more than a passive child" (Taylor 115). The authority with which the Mariner speaks captivates his audience to the extent that even if his story was fictional, it still leaves a deep impression founded in reality. Although the story may be a product of the imagination, the wedding guest's impression of the tale is very real. In *The Turn of the Screw*, Douglas carries that same impression and acts as a channel for the governess to further exercise her will on the reader to understand her story's perspective. For instance, the reader never truly learns why Miles was expelled from school, but the governess suspects that Miles was expelled because he spread evil tales about Peter Quint. Because she has already convinced herself of this "truth", when Miles does not answer her inquires with what she wanted to hear, she "seemed to float not into clearness, but into darker obscure". The governess has complete control over her language and word choice, which allows the reader to be easily convinced of her logic. It is not until the governess begins to lead to the climax of the novella that the reader begins to seriously doubt of her authenticity.

Our confidence in the storyteller builds as both the Mariner and the governess become more passionate in their tales and their words begin to shape the reader's own interpretations. In Freud's "The 'Uncanny' (1919)", he suggests that, "we order our judgment to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard souls, spirits and spectres as though their existence had the same validity in their world as our own has in the external world" (18).

Because the writer imposes his will upon his own story, he can divert our rationality to become more accepting of the supernatural and the uncanny. Freud further explains that the storyteller has the ability to deceive his audience because of his direct influence on the story despite his claim that a story is both true and implausible:

[The storyteller] takes advantage, as it were, of our supposedly surmounted superstitiousness; he deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility. We react to his inventions as we should have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object. (Freud 18-19)

Although the narrator of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* initially presents the Mariner as a “grey-beard loon”, his reaction to the supernatural seems reasonable because it stems from superstition. At the beginning of his tale, the Mariner fixates on the role of the Albatross, a bird of good omen that he shoots down with a crossbow. Using the repetitive phrase, “For all averred, I had killed the bird”, Coleridge emphasizes on the two contradictory interpretations that the Mariner uses to explain his fate. First, the Mariner reflects, “I had done a hellish thing, / ... / For all averred, I had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow” (Coleridge 91-94), yet in the next stanza, the Mariner discredits this interpretation:

Then all averred, I had killed the bird
 That brought the fog and mist.
 ’Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
 That bring the fog and mist. (99-103)

The killing of the Albatross did not bring the crew immediate misfortune, but once the breeze died down and the crew “dropped down one by one” (219), the superstition seems more

reasonable than any other explanation. The reader tends to accept the Mariner's interpretation that supernatural forces are in control because of the curse that follows these events. This allows the Mariner to delve deeper into the supernatural where he can "overstep the bounds of possibility" (Freud 18). The Mariner's reproduction of events through storytelling allows him to focus and intensify elements of his story in order to control its impression upon the listener, thus creating an artificial memory.

As a storyteller, the Mariner creates an artificial memory by choosing particular aspects of his tale to represent in order to convey the same feelings that he felt during the experience to his listeners, effectively passing his burden onto someone else. In the *Biographia*, Coleridge explains that "the will itself by confining and intensifying the attention may arbitrarily give vividness or distinctness to any object whatsoever" (223), which gives the storyteller control over the impression of his tale on his readers. For instance, when the narrator introduces the Mariner as a "grey-beard loon" (11), he establishes a judgment on the Mariner that changes the reader's willingness to believe the Mariner's tale. From the application of the will, "we may deduce the uselessness if not the absurdity of certain recent schemes which promise an artificial memory, but which in reality can only produce a confusion and debasement of the fancy" (Coleridge 223). The fancy is meant to accompany and reproduce the imagination, yet the repetition of one central image or phrase can create a fragmented, disproportionate reflection of the truth. Throughout the poem, the narrator returns to the persistent image of the Mariner's "glittering eye" (3), which occurs only in interjections from the wedding guest and indicates the passing of a curse. In the Mariner's own repetition of his tale, however, he places significance on the eyes of his fellow sailors that curse him: "Each turned his face with ghastly pang, / And

cursed me with his eye. (212-215). He later attributes their curse to his inability to die and release him from his suffering:

But oh! more horrible than that
 Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
 Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
 And yet I could not die.

The eye that curses him becomes a striking memory for the Mariner and seems to transfer into the narrator's recitation of the story in the form of a "glittering eye" (3). In both instances, the emphasis on the cursed eye distracts from a rational interpretation of events, and each time the Marnier's story is retold by the Marnier or the narrator, the vividness of the cursed eye is heightened.

The role of the storyteller's will and the use of repetitive language to recreate an impression of a story is also used in the American gothic tradition to warp perspective and challenge reality. Edgar Allen Poe, for instance, demonstrates the effect of the storyteller's will on a story by exaggerating the narrator's state of mind in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Mesmerized by the repetitive thought of the old man's eye, the narrator is driven into evident madness, but tries to rationalize with the reader as he tells his tale: "If you still think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body" (Poe 504). The narrator recognizes that he seems mad, but tries to convince the reader otherwise. Although his actions are caused by an irrational impulse, he attempts to retell his story with sensibility that the reader is not compelled to believe. Notably, the narrator tells his story in past tense, which indicates that he has already been caught and is now reflecting on his hideous actions without remorse. This reflection, however, is not a true account of events, but rather a distorted version

of what the narrator thinks happened. The narrator is caught up in what Coleridge describes as the fancy which he separates from the imagination as a “mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice” (313). The narrator’s will to convince the reader that he reasonably murdered someone serves to distort his memory and divert himself and the reader from the truth. Creating an artificial memory, the narrator’s maniacal obsession of the old man’s eye shapes the way that the narrator relates his memory because it is an image that haunts him and drives him to his initial madness that blinds him from any rationality.

While Edgar Allen Poe exaggerates his narrator’s obvious delusion in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, James leaves it up to the reader to decide whether the governess is deluded or is telling the truth. The reader tends to willingly accept implausible events as truth in order to help shape our own understanding, but with a closer look, the governess’ rationality begins to unravel. Although the governess may truly see the apparitions of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, her only proof of their existence is derived from the children’s lack of acknowledgement of the ghosts. For instance, the governess determines that Flora can see Miss Jessel because Flora pointedly refuses to look in the direction of the apparition. When Mrs. Grose asks if Flora told her that she saw a ghost, the governess replies, “Not a word – that’s the horror. She kept it to herself” (James 54) and is determined that Flora will lie about it: “She’ll say she is n’t – she’ll lie!” (55). Although this event does not prove the presence of the ghosts, Flora’s indifference does not prove that Miss Jessel had appeared to her either. John H. Pearson also notes that the governess, “aggressively questions Mrs. Grose until she has material for a narrative that understands the encounters” (282). The governess describes Miss Jessel vaguely as “poor, almost shabby. But ... with extraordinary beauty” (56) and prompts Mrs. Grose to explain the circumstances of Miss

Jessel's death, which adds support to her claim. Interestingly, at the beginning of *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess warns the reader that she was skeptical about recapturing her experience in words. The governess reflects that "I scarce know how to put my story into words that shall be a credible picture of my state of mind; but I was in these days literally able to find a joy in the extraordinary flight of heroism the occasion demanded of me" (James 51). This skepticism surrounding her tale emerges from her inability to articulate her experience without adding her own interpretation of events and searching for a higher meaning; in this case a chance for heroism. Although the governess warns us of her doubts, the reader's pending interest in her story accepts her as a reliable source. When the governess ends her tale abruptly with Miles' death, however, her control over her story seems to dissipate leaving the reader with unanswered questions about the supernatural and an ambiguous ending to analyze.

At the end of *The Turn of the Screw*, the reader questions the governess' actions when her reliance on the absence of evidence as critical proof contributes to Miles' death. The governess's fixation with coercing Miles into admitting that he in communication with the ghost of Peter Quint blinds her from the child's assumed innocence. Because she has convinced herself that she is rescuing Miles by purging him of evil, she orchestrates her language to reflect her heroism: "For there again, against the glass, as if to blight [Miles's] confession and stay his answer, was the hideous author of our woe – the white face of damnation. I felt a sick swim at the drop of my victory and all the return of my battle" (James 115-116). The governess's vision of herself as a bold rescuer is not consistent with Miles's reaction as he remains ignorant to the presence of Peter Quint: "“Is she *here?*” Miles panted as he caught with his sealed eyes the direction of my words” (116). Not only is Miles ignorant of Peter Quint's presence, he assumes that the governess sees the apparition of Miss Jessel when he asks, “Is she *here?*”. While Miles' “sealed

eyes” (116) are incapable of seeing what the governess sees, his terror is evident when “the direction of her words” incites his terror fueled by the imagination. Incorporating Coleridge’s concept of the fancy, the governess’ will for Miles to see and the “direction of her words” is what could have “literally frightened [Miles] to death” (Wilson 94). From the governess’ perspective, however, she relieves herself of any responsibility concerning Miles’ death and ends her story abruptly without answering any of the reader’s pending questions.

The governess’s recitation of her tale gives the reader the illusion that we understand what is happening through the governess’s eyes, yet by the end of the novel, it is hard to tell the difference between reality and fantasy. Freud explains in “The ‘Uncanny’(1919)” that the storyteller, in this case the governess, has the license to impose his will upon the story that, in turn, determines the path the story will take:

The story-teller has a peculiar directive influence over us; by means of the states of mind into which he can put us and the expectations he can rouse in us, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of efforts from the same material. (Freud 19)

The governess, in this case, insists that she care deeply for the children, yet as she becomes more invested in protecting them, she becomes neglectful of her duties as governess. After she determines the danger of the apparitions, the governess confesses, “I began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised tension, that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness... it didn’t last as suspense – it was superseded by horrible proofs” (James 52). Here, the governess speaks with certain authority of what she saw and what the

consequences could be if she did not protect them, yet the “horrible proofs” that she refers to never truly emerge. Although it may seem that the governess suffers from sincere delusion, James purposely writes *The Turn of the Screw* to resist any true interpretation. Whether or not the governess truly sees the ghosts and tries to save the children remains a mystery to the reader, and the abrupt conclusion only leads to more ambiguity. In the same manner, Coleridge’s Mariner repeats his tale by fixating on both his experience and his interpretation of events, which draws the reader further from the truth.

The Mariner’s own mesmerization of his tale prevents him from fully understanding it, yet he returns to his tale compulsively as if to rationalize his unsatisfactory conclusion and make it suddenly believable. Freud explains that, “the storyteller has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities that we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases” (18). While James pairs the supernatural with reality to enhance the uncanny effect, Coleridge attempts to demonstrate the danger caused by the supernatural coinciding with reality. Like the governess, the Mariner also leaves the reader with an unsatisfying conclusion that resists definite interpretation, yet the wedding guest is visibly affected by the tale: “A sadder and a wiser man, / He woke the morrow morn” (624-625). Adela Pinch argues that “when we reproduce in our minds the feeling of another, what we feel is never simply a repetition of that feeling, but an excitement beyond its proper bounds” (Pinch 843). This suggests that through the reproduction of his tale, the Mariner transfers his passion and intensity onto the wedding guest and the narrator, who then captures and amplifies the Mariner’s anxious compulsion to repeat his tale. Arguably, the Mariner’s unsatisfactory conclusion is meant to shield the wedding guest from the severe realities of his tale, but his lack of a conclusion, instead, becomes a source of repetition for his listeners. With

each repetition, the narrator reenacts the events in order to find new conclusions repressed in the Mariner's story.

The supernatural in both Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and James' *The Turn of the Screw* lends to the ambiguous nature of each story's conclusions, which ultimately gives the story its power. Without closure, the reader is left with infinite uncertainty about the events that preceded the conclusion and infects the reader with the need to repeat the story in a search for meaning. By using Coleridge's fancy, storytellers use the will in an attempt to ground their story within concrete explanations, which fails to capture or explain the essence of the supernatural. For instance, Coleridge's Mariner reduces the supernatural to fit his Christianizing conclusion and seeks redemption by interpreting the symbolism in his own tale. When the narrator of the Mariner's tale seeks meaning for the supernatural, he fails and instead contributes to the repetition compulsion because he can never find closure. In the American gothic tradition, writers and poets use the skepticism surrounding the supernatural to enhance the uncanny effect by blurring the line between what is real and what is implausible. Similar to Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the American gothic focuses on how the complexity of the narration effects the reader's interpretation and belief in the supernatural. James' *The Turn of the Screw* attempts to rationalize the governess' experience through multiple narrations, but the novel's ambiguous ending only leaves the reader with unanswerable questions that neither confirms nor denies the existence of ghosts. Each storyteller uses the fancy to resolve their story's ambiguity and thus to dispel its captivating power by lending the story concrete meaning, but these attempts are ultimately doomed to fail.

CHAPTER 3:

THE “DANGEROUS” IMAGINATION’S EFFECT ON WOMEN AND THE UNEDUCATED

Coleridge was intrigued by the supernatural and its effect on the imagination but was hesitant about allowing uneducated minds access to it. Among these uneducated minds, Coleridge considered women unable to handle the passions of the imagination that are prominent in his poetry. He expresses in his early poetry how reality can be obscured by the passions of the imagination and specifically chooses a woman in *Christabel* to demonstrate how the imagination can overwhelm and devastate an innocent woman. In a similar manner, the supernatural elements of the American gothic often focused on the excessive passions of women. Although some writers revealed that the exposure to the imagination led women into a fit of hysteria, Henry James represents the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* as empowered by her passions to seek the truth. While Coleridge demonstrates that women should avoid the effects of an overactive imagination, James leaves it to the reader to decide whether the governess’ passions act as a channel for clarity or exhibit a descent into madness.

Coleridge rejected the idea that the imagination should be accessible to the uneducated and departed from Wordsworth who believed that “the language of rustic life [is] purified from provincialism” (Coleridge 343). Wordsworth argued that “repeated experience and regular feelings is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language” (Coleridge 343). Instead, Coleridge was wary of the rustic because “it is very possible to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters” (344) which can lead the uneducated

mind to an unregulated “heat of passion” (344). The uneducated mind reacts instead of finding understanding and seeks out generalized truths rather than appreciate the complexity of the unknown. The supernatural magnifies the extent of the imagination because it introduces the possibility of a realm outside our understanding. Demonstrating the effect of the imagination on an innocent, sheltered mind, Coleridge’s *Christabel* explores the experience of a young woman who delves into a supernatural world without restraint, which is later echoed by Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw* whose governess tries and fails to control an intrusion of the supernatural.

Coleridge demonstrates how the imagination can be dangerous to an uneducated, innocent mind by demonstrating how the supernatural can easily overwhelm the human mind in *Christabel*. Although Wordsworth had “faith in the restorative powers of the imagination” (Sha 219), Coleridge believed that the “imagination had more influence over women and the uneducated” (219) which allowed the imagination to act more like a poison than a cure. For this reason, Coleridge chooses to represent the ruin of a young woman after she encounters the overwhelming power of the imagination. At the beginning of the poem, Coleridge presents Christabel with ideal dreams and aspirations, which begins to reveal her separation from reality:

She had dreams all yesternight
 Of her own betrothed knight;
 And she in the midnight wood will pray
 For the weal of her lover that’s far away (27-30)

Christabel’s thoughts indicate that she separates herself from reality voluntarily while she dreams of an ideal, fantastical life. In a dream state, the imagination is vulnerable because a dreamer willingly dispels all ties to reality to become engulfed by the fantastical. Coleridge also demonstrates this danger more directly in “Kubla Khan” when the narrator glimpses an ideal

world and warns, “Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair! (48-49). The dream state leaves the dreamer vulnerable to the products of the imagination because when his reason is suspended, the dreamer is capable of becoming lost in his own fantastical realm. Similarly, Christabel arises from her dream state to find a helpless Geraldine whose façade leads the young princess unknowingly into a world beyond her understanding.

Henry James’s governess is not necessarily a dreamer, but like Christabel, it is clear that she has aspirations for romance at the beginning of *The Turn of the Screw*. In a brief exchange, the narrator and Douglas discuss her motives for taking the job of governess. The narrator suggests that the governess succumbed to “the seduction exercised by a splendid young man” (James 27) to which Douglas replies, “She saw him only twice” (27). At first, the reader may doubt an amorous relationship between the master and the governess, but the narrator responds, “Yes, but that’s just the beauty of her passion” (27). Like Christabel, the governess understandably seeks companionship and accepts anything that seems to offer what she desires. Seemingly contradictory to her desires, the governess takes the position at Bly despite the great responsibility and loneliness. Her acceptance of the position indicates that she seeks more from her governess position, whether she seeks possible romance or the potential to rise in the social hierarchy. Bruce Robbins suggests that *The Turn of the Screw* is an unfinished “version of the Cinderella story” where the governess seeks both romance and power. (285). Ideally in the fairy tale, “the servant or governess who is in love with a master far above her wealth and rank, yet who somehow manages to marry him in the end, has carried with her the aspirations of generations of women and men who are discontented with the limited possibilities offered them by their society” (285). Although the governess assumes the role as overseer of the household

and defies the restraints of her prior social class, she lacks the prospective romance from her employer and must fulfill her desire through her imagination.

Although James never directly returns to the possibility of romance between the governess and the master, the governess reveals that the “beauty of her passion” (James 27) lies in her imagination. When first entering Bly, the governess recalls, “I had the view of a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all the colour out of story-books and fairy-tales” (31). The governess’ imagination creates a fantasy world that is abruptly shattered by reality. Instead of a castle, Bly is a “big ugly antique but convenient house” (31) that was mostly vacant and under her care. The absent master acts as a distant authority figure instead of holding a traditional position in the household. The potential romance also causes the governess to blend the lines between her imagination and reality, which disrupts what the reader considers real. For instance, when the governess first sees the apparition of Peter Quint, she is astonished at the “sense that [her] imagination had, in a flash, turned real” (37) and admitted afterward that “the man who met [her] eyes was not the person [she] had precipitately supposed” (38). Although subtle, James suggests that the governess dreamt of the master, who would be the only man that she would expect and desire to visit Bly. Despite the impossibility of a relationship with the master, it seems that the governess uses her imagination to fuel her desire for romance.

Demonstrating how woman are easily swept away by their own imagination and are more vulnerable to the dangerous effects of the imagination, Coleridge portrays Christabel as manipulated by her own passions. He emphasizes Christabel’s naïve mentality when he describes how the heightened perception of her good deed to rescue Geraldine causes her to misjudge the reality of her situation and allow a demonic being into the castle. After rescuing Geraldine,

Coleridge repeats the lines, “So free from danger, free from fear, / They crossed the court: right glad they were” (135-136), as they shift from the forest to the castle. Although the speaker of the poem delivers these lines, they represent Christabel’s enthusiasm at the extraordinary opportunity to rescue a maiden like herself, a role that is typically given to a man. Christabel even assumes a knight’s role as she, “actively courts Geraldine and invites, leads and even carries her over the threshold as if she were her bride, saving her from the taboos that guard the entrances to the castle, determined to hold onto this one potential companion” (Taylor 712). As a young woman, Christabel is drawn to the prospect of romance and is blinded by her desires. Because she is constantly seeking companionship, she uses the imagination to fill the void of that missing companion and immediately tries to use Geraldine to fill that void permanently.

Like a knight rescuing a maiden, Christabel expects that her heroic act will secure her a permanent companion, but because she is a woman, she cannot have the same fantasy. As a dreamer, Christabel imagines an ideal world where Geraldine cures her loneliness, rather than her father or a husband. Even though Geraldine takes the form of a woman, she is a supernatural being whose dominance and authority places her in a more masculine role. Geraldine enters the castle as a seemingly innocent maiden, and then deceitfully demands power over Christabel and the castle. Overpowering Christabel, Geraldine blurs the lines between her role as a woman and assumes a more masculine role, where “a transfer of power seems to occur; one young woman absorbs another, eradicates her will and her speech . . . and fills her with the underside of her own vicious features” (Taylor 718). In desperation to fill the void of her loneliness, Christabel tries to use Geraldine as a means to fill that void, but instead, Christabel is tricked by Geraldine’s supernatural allure. Coleridge uses Christabel to demonstrate how women are not only vulnerable to the effects of the imagination but also are easily tricked by the potential to fulfill

their desires. James also uses a female character to demonstrate how desires control a woman's imagination, but unlike Coleridge, James portrays the governess as having some authority over the imagination.

Although the governess does not narrate her own story, James offers some insight into the governess' thought process, which helps the reader understand how the imagination effects the governess' actions. Although the narrator focuses very briefly on a possible romantic interest between the governess and the master, the governess sees the children as her only connection to the master. Just like Christabel, who thought her heroic actions would help fulfill her desire for companionship, the governess tries to protect the children from the ghosts to catch the attention of the master: "In her own eyes, as she admits, she is trying her best to win his love by heroically protecting his niece and nephew from the ghosts. But heroic or not, she manages only to alienate Flora and to kill Miles" (Robbins 285). Despite the eerie ending of *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess still manages to use her authority to project herself as a hero. When the governess sees Peter Quint appear to Miles, she reflects, "I felt a sick swim at the drop of my victory and all the return of my battle, so that the wildness of my veritable leap only served as a great betrayal" (James 116). The heroic language that the governess uses acts as a barrier between what is really happening and what she thinks is happening. The reader cannot discern from her words whether the ghost of Peter Quint has truly appeared or if the ghost is the governess' invention to portray herself as a hero. Regardless, the governess' mentioned victory is not from protecting the boy, but from the thought that she finally has proof that the apparitions are real.

By the end of *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess loses sight of her original passion to protect the children, which transforms into an increasing passion to prove that the ghosts are real. To Coleridge, the "heat of passion" (Coleridge 344) generated by the imagination of an

uneducated mind, or woman, has the power of “dangerous enthusiasm” (Mee 17), which essentially ignores the lines between the real and the imaginary. Arguably, this “dangerous enthusiasm” (17) gives the governess a potent and dominant voice in the ending scene that prevents the reader from determining how Miles truly dies. Frightened, Miles does not see Peter Quint and instead asks, “Is she *here*?” (James 116) referring to the apparition of Miss Jessel. It is possible that through his child-like imagination, Miles is overwhelmed by the possibility of a ghost and his heart stops from fear.

Children demonstrate how the imagination can overcome reality without the proper will and judgment. According to Freud, children do not create a barrier between the real and the imaginary: “We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and lifeless objects, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people” (8). Children are quintessentially the most vulnerable to the dangerous imagination regardless of their gender. Although the governess is incited by her passions and is guided by her own rationalizations, the children are the most impressionable. James never makes it clear in *The Turn of the Screw* whether the ghosts are real or that the children are involved with the supernatural, but it is apparent that the governess’ suspicions holds imaginative influence over Miles at the concluding scene of the novella. When the governess sees the ghost of Peter Quint, Miles admits that he does not see him, but he is convinced by the governess’ actions that a ghost is present. It is possible that Miles’ imagination, paired with the governess’ passionate enthusiasm, turned real and “she has literally frightened him to death” (Wilson 94). Transferred to a child’s vulnerable mind, the governess’ passion amplified by the imagination overwhelms the boy who dies as a result.

Unlike in Coleridge's *Christabel* where the supernatural plays an active role in the devastation of Christabel, the supernatural is more passive in *The Turn of the Screw*. The ghosts often appear in the presence of the children, but the extent of their evil is not determined by their actions. Instead, the governess declares the ghosts evil after collecting painstaking evidence that she gathers by intently watching the children. The governess convinces herself that the children see the ghosts and becomes passionate in establishing the truth: "by the dark prodigy I knew, the imagination of all evil *had* been opened up to him: all the justice within me ached for the proof that it could ever have flowered into an act" (James 92). Although the governess lacks solid proof that Miles and Flora communicate with ghosts, her confidence persuades the reader into believing her logic and the reader's imagination fills the unknown factors.

The horror of *The Turn of the Screw* does not originate from the existence of ghosts, but rather the possibility that they exist. In James' "Preface to the 1908 Edition", he describes his theory that horror is not derived from the specifications of evil, but indeed from the reader's own experience with evil. He suggests that if he made, "the reader's general vision of evil intense enough ... his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars" (James 123). The governess' vivid description of Peter Quint's presence suggests that either her imagination has strayed into madness or she actually lived through the horrific event. She recounts, "he was at me in a white rage, bewildered, glaring vainly over the place and ... filled the room like the taste of poison, the wide overwhelming presence" (116). Recalling Coleridge's warnings against the dangers of the imagination, Peter Quint's presence is overwhelming and poisonous, and his malign influence extends beyond the text to the reader. James purposefully ends *The Turn of the Screw* without establishing whether the ghosts are real because a rational

explanation would give the reader a sense of closure and diminish the supernatural effect of the story.

While imagination has the potential to be a restorative power, it becomes dangerous when it transforms into a poisonous entity that demands authority and entraps the will. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the dangerous imagination is associated with the infectious passion that the governess uses to persuade the reader or as the malicious ghosts who attempt to entrap the will of children. In *Christabel*, Geraldine embodies Coleridge's concept of the dangerous imagination. Geraldine appears to Christabel as a potential companion, yet betrays her trust by taking her innocence:

Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropped to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side-
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! shield sweet Christabel! (250-254)

The narrator echoes the speaker in "Kubla Khan" who shouts, "Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!" (48-49) by repetitively interjecting "shield her!" (250) in an attempt to cast away Geraldine's evil. Like the speaker of "Kubla Khan", the imagination has already consumed Christabel and Geraldine has her will: "O Geraldine! one hour was thine- / Thou'st had thy will!" (305-306). Christabel is left helpless and overwhelmed by Geraldine's supernatural power. Although Christabel is now able to perceive Geraldine as a danger, she is unable to communicate her knowledge in order to protect the rest of the castle.

Coleridge depicts the supernatural as a source of power that has the ability to manipulate the minds of women and the uneducated and expose them to the dangerous imagination. As a woman who has been exposed to the dangerous imagination, Christabel is incapable of speech

because she is reduced to a “dizzy trance / Stumbling on the unsteady ground” (589-590) where she “Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound” (591). The only character able to identify the dangerous imagination, yet avoid becoming absorbed by it is Bracy the bard. Through a dream, the bard has an impressionable vision of a dove with a “bright green snake / Coiled around its wings and neck”, which represents Geraldine’s control over Christabel. As an educated man and poet, the bard represents the kind of man that Coleridge believes can harness the imagination. Those who cannot properly interpret his dream, however, ignore the bard’s accurate representation of the situation and are unknowingly influenced by Geraldine’s power: “he, who saw this Geraldine / Had deemed her sure a thing divine” (473). Regardless of the bard’s power to access the imagination through the separation of a dream, his voice remains unheard and the dangerous imagination still consumes the castle in the form of Geraldine.

Although most of the supernatural elements of *Christabel* are portrayed as malicious, the brief interjection of Christabel’s dead mother represents a more benevolent side to the supernatural. Notably, the mother’s spirit remains unseen to Christabel, yet she is the only entity actively trying to protect Christabel’s innocence. Geraldine’s façade temporarily falters as Christabel’s mother attempts protect Christabel and preserve her sanctity:

But soon, with altered voice, said she—

‘Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!

.....

Though thou her guardian spirit be,

Off, woman off! ‘tis given to me. (204-213).

As a spiritual being, the mother represents all that Christabel is lacking. While Geraldine embodies the dangerous imagination that attempts to poison the mind, the spirit of Christabel’s

mother represents a restorative imagination that can cure the ailments of both Christabel and Sir Leoline. The mother imperceptibly completes her daughter as her counterpart in a spiritual realm, as a maternal figure and as a link to the divine. Coleridge suggests that the restorative power of the imagination exists, but those who seek it out channel the dangerous imagination instead.

Coleridge feared that through poetry the uneducated would be more likely to be deceived by the imagination. Without the proper understanding of the imagination and the restraint of the will, the uneducated could become absorbed by a poem's "unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters" (Coleridge 344) and act out with "dangerous enthusiasm" (Mee 17). By introducing the supernatural, the danger of enthusiasm is heightened because the imagination begins to fill the void of the unknown factors. While Coleridge sees this concept as a dangerous form of the imagination, James uses the suggestion of the supernatural to intensify the reader's imagination. Unlike Coleridge, James leaves it up to the reader to discern whether the horror of the novel comes from the apparitions or the governess herself. Although both authors are intrigued by the supernatural, Coleridge cautions that the imagination can be led astray by the supernatural, while James embraces the uncanny effect of blurring the lines between the real and the fantastic.

CONCLUSION:

A supernatural tale has an uneasy influence on the reader that cannot be rationally explained. Coleridge uses the supernatural to demonstrate the effects of the imagination in his early poetry. Even though Coleridge considered the imagination as a channel to transcendence, he warned against its deceptive and corruptive power in the hands of the uneducated. He feared imagination's dangerous ability to incite the passions of the public so much that he abandoned his supernatural poetry for a more reserved style in his later work. Because the Romantic Movement focused more on finding transcendence through ordinary life, Coleridge's incorporation of the supernatural was unpopular during his time, but it was revived with the rise of the Gothic novel and reinvented by American gothic writers. For this reason, Coleridge's supernatural poetry tends to be more comparable with the writers of the American gothic than with his contemporaries.

In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge carefully defines the components of the imagination, yet he constantly struggled to reconcile these rational definitions in his own poetry. Coleridge felt that many of his poems were unfinished because he was unable to perfectly articulate his poetic vision into language, leaving the poem's meaning open to the reader's imagination. Though his ability to capture the reader's imagination in this way was an inspiration to writers like Edgar Allen Poe and Henry James, it is in conflict with his theory of the imagination expressed in the *Biographia*. Coleridge did not believe that the common reader had the intellectual tools to draw the correct conclusions from his writing, and he feared that the imaginative power of his poetry would have a dangerous effect in the wrong hands. Coleridge often left his readers with unsatisfactory conclusions to diminish the potency of the poem and to

avoid leaving the conclusion to the reader's imagination. Dissatisfied with these conclusions, however, his readers have no choice but to depend on their imagination to fill in the missing components of his poetry.

In "Kubla Khan", for instance, Coleridge recollects a dream in poetic form, which he left unfinished because he was unable to fully articulate his imaginative realm into words. Attempting to do so, he incorporates a repetition compulsion in his poetry as if he is trying to evoke the power of his vision for the reader. Without the benefit of seeing Coleridge's vision, the reader seizes this repetition and can only use his imagination to construct a new vision. This concept is also used in enhancing the mesmerizing effect of the supernatural. For instance, each repetition of the glittering eye in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* amplifies the uncanny effect because the reader is constantly drawn to it. Despite Coleridge's assertion at the beginning of his poem that the Mariner is a "grey-bearded loon", the reader's willingness to believe in the supernatural prevents him from fully doubting the Mariner's extraordinary tale. Rather than finding faults in his story, the reader, like the wedding guest, tends to be disappointed by the moralizing conclusion, as if there was some greater truth that is missing. In an attempt to reign in the power of his poetry, Coleridge added this moralizing conclusion, but the mysterious meaning of the Mariner's tale still haunts the reader beyond the text.

In his early poetry, Coleridge seems to contradict his alleged commitment to maintain control over the imagination. He exposes his readers to the dangerous effects of the imagination because instead of reaching a natural truth, he leaves his reader to imagine all the infinite possibilities. Ultimately, Coleridge turned his back on the supernatural because he was unable to resolve his own ambivalence toward his early poetry. He saw the potential for the imagination to be a channel to transcendence, but he could not justify its corruptive power over uneducated

minds. Though Coleridge died believing that he had failed as a poet, generations of American writers were inspired by his ability to engage the reader's imagination. Poe referred to Coleridge's "towering intellect! his gigantic power!"(396), in his "Letter to B____", yet he takes issue with Coleridge's attempt to define the imagination in the *Biographia*. Instead, Poe combines the supernatural with reality so that the reader is impassioned by the possibilities of the imagination. By incorporating repetition, questionable storytellers and narrative style, also found in Coleridge's poetry, Poe manipulates the imagination to purposefully enhance the uncanny effect.

When Coleridge uses the supernatural in his writing, he keeps it separate from his representation of reality because he feared blurring the lines between the imaginary and the real. In Poe, however, the distinction between imagination and reality is blurred within the subjectivity of his mad or hysteric narrators. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", Poe places the reader in the mind of a narrator who cannot distinguish his own delusions from the objective world. The discerning reader, however, can differentiate the reality of the narrator's crime from his delusion. As the American gothic matured with Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, the supernatural became more intricately woven into reality, and James deliberately makes it impossible to distinguish between the narrator's subjectivity and objective reality. James skillfully incorporates the supernatural with the governess' mundane routine relying on the reader's willingness to believe in the supernatural. He explores the potential realities of a ghost story and ends his novella with perfect ambiguity, which only leaves the reader with unanswerable questions. Assuming that our narrator is reliable, the reader's natural curiosity compels them to seek meaning and exercise a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 314), which according to Coleridge, gives the supernatural its influential power.

Coleridge recognized the power of the supernatural on the imagination of his readers, and his early poetry contained the seeds of the American gothic. He was limited by the morality of his time, however, and his need to compartmentalize the supernatural in his poetry prevented him from fully exploring its poetic power. The American gothic writers admired Coleridge for his literary style and expanded his use of the supernatural to enhance its uncanny effect on the reader. Poe and James incorporated the supernatural into the subjectivity of the narrator to actively confront the reader's imagination. They diverged from Coleridge to establish a narrative structure that deceives the reader into believing in the possibility of the supernatural. James' only concern was for the structural "virtue of the story" (James 119). James constructed every detail of *The Turn of the Screw* in order to maintain the story's perfect ambiguity. The reader can never be certain which aspects of the story are objectively true and which are part of the narrator's subjective delusions, so the story never loses its haunting power.

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