

Loneliness and Alienation as Aspects of Death in the Psychological Sense in S. T. Coleridge's Poetry

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Generally speaking, death is one of the most existential questions that ever stir up man's emotion. It has long been disturbing philosophers and thinkers. So naturally, a great deal of metaphysical mediations and philosophical thoughts have been produced in the course of the long intellectual history of man. The question also occupies broad areas in religious and becomes a central dilemma for every man.

Death may simply be defined as the end of life. Every living being eventually dies; it is inevitable and nothing negates that dark power. Life is the burning candle and death is the extinguished flame. Another definition, which is slightly different from the first, says that "death is the fatal shattering of personal existence"⁽¹⁾.

In Heavenly religions, such as Christianity and Islam, believing in the other world, define death as "a transition from one phase of life to another"⁽²⁾. In other words, it is part of life and both life and death are inseparable and one completes the other.

Despite all what has been said, death is still a question in which intelligence can find no answer, "it is a dark narrow road where man must walk alone"⁽³⁾

According to Christianity, there are three types of death: physical death, spiritual death and eternal death. Physical death is the dissolution of the body into its component parts. Spiritual death is a state of sin and darkness. In this case, man is alienated from God; his heart becomes harder, his eyes blinder, and the pleasure of lust increases. However, there is a way of turning back to God through repentance. While eternal death embodies the final loss of the power and chance to repent and turn to God⁽⁴⁾.

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In literature, death has been tackled in a different perspective from religion. In the ancient epics, Homer's *Odyssey* *The Iliad*, the epic of Gilgamesh, all their heroes were deeply troubled by the idea of death and looked forward toward finding an outlet for immortality but in vain.

In medieval time, the concept of death was overwhelmed with magic, myths and some religious decrees. In the Elizabethan Age, Shakespeare depicts life as meaningless and death's shadow stops its proper flow. While Milton deals with death in a very clever way in which he mixes the mythical, the religions and personal view together.

In Romanticism, the romantic poet's dissatisfaction with everything around him leads him to live in isolation and to be alienated from his society⁽⁵⁾. In other words, the major themes that are widely tackled in the romantic poetry are the mystery of life and death and man's fate, which can easily be touched in the poems of most of the romantic poets. However, death and its associated aspects such as loneliness, alienation, melancholy, agony, lack of joy, despair... are major subject matters in fiction, poetry and drama during the romantic period.

In Coleridge's, a series of death aspects are specifically found in his poems. His suffering grades down from loneliness, agony and despair then loss of joy and decline of poetic mind. All come under the comprehensive tent of the theme of death-in-life or life-in-death, i.e., it is the psychological death, not an active one.

Depending on what has been mentioned, it becomes clear that Coleridge's poetry is pregnant of themes, symbols and images of death, a matter which makes him one of the rare poets who write and deal with this abstract subject. The relationship between this matter and Coleridge's poetry is that of cause and effect. The former (the cause) is embodied in suffering and is represented in many aspects such as loneliness, alienation, agony, loss of joy, despair...etc. While the effect can be seen in the poetic images mentioned in his poems.

However, since the subject is too varied and detailed, it will therefore make a very long study, so it is properly seen that this attempt can be restricted inclusively to two aspects: loneliness and alienation.

1. Loneliness:

The feeling of loneliness is universal. In addition to the insolvable problems in man's mind concerning God, nature, the mystery of life and death, specific problems in each society have caused man to feel a dreadful isolation known as loneliness⁽⁶⁾. According to this, isolation is defined as "standing alone or separation from other things or persons"⁽⁷⁾. Thus, this feeling is one sense of the homelessness of the soul, of being an alien in the domain wherein one belongs.

Life stands on social relationships and man is gregarious by nature, he is a social being, so the state of loneliness and solitude is indeed close to the state of death in life; a matter which Coleridge normally deals with throughout his poetry. Two forces are in conflict in the state of solitude: the internal force, represented in man's own desires, and the external force, embodied in the obligations of society.

Poetry is mainly a release from tensions and anxieties which in turn cause loneliness. Hence loneliness is largely responsible for producing great literary work.

One cannot, therefore, positively say that Coleridge writes about his loneliness in every poem, but his poetry reflects his anguish and suffering whether he expresses himself directly or through his characters or through images and symbols. Hence, one can easily fall in with the theme of loneliness and frustration in his poetry. The sense of loneliness appears here and there in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". In part 4, stanza 3, Coleridge declares the mariner's loneliness openly:

*Alone, alone, all, all Alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony*

(Ancient Mariner, ll.232-235)

The repetition of the word ‘alone’ emphasizes the state of loneliness which is as harsh as travelling alone on a ship, surrounded by the dead bodies of the crew. His state is the state of helplessness and solitude⁽⁸⁾.

The mariner’s sense of loneliness and helplessness develops. His anguished soul is punished by ‘Life-in-Death’. His shipmates die one by one and, he, just like slimy creatures, lives alone surrounded by death and fear:

***The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.***

(ll.236-239)

The guilty soul becomes conscious of what it has done and of its isolation in the world. The mariner begins to realize the consequences of his action for the first time when he sees the phantom ship which decides his fate:

*The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man’s blood with cold.*

(ll.193-194)

The night at which the mariner’s companions die can stand for the darkness of the soul when it suddenly finds itself alone, robbed of familiar ties⁽⁹⁾. That lonely soul culminates in the horror of utter solitude:

***O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
Alone on a wide wide sea:
So lonely’t was, that God himself
Scarce seemed there to be.***

(ll.597-600)

Here, the mariner’s loneliness reaches its highest peak. He is alone surrounded by dead bodies in the empty sea as if the grace of God had departed the world. In such a state man’s faith in God is shaken.

The ancient mariner shoots the harmless albatross, and hospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen. By this action, he commits an unforgivable sin. As a result, he suffers from loneliness, alienation and agony.

Though the scene of “Kubla Khan” in general is that of death, yet one can handle it with loneliness. In fact, its interpretations are varied, yet they should be pressed into any specific meaning. “Kubla Khan” is full of images and symbols, whose meaning is elusive and whose presence in the poem abides beyond any thematic meaning⁽¹⁰⁾. In this respect, it is not unusual to find out the theme of loneliness in the poem besides other main themes. Loneliness appears through the four major images that are presented in the poem. From the very beginning, the image of the dome of the palace shows the theme of loneliness:

IN Xandu did Kubla Khan’

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

(Kubla Khan, ll.1-2)

Coleridge introduces an image of that lonely dome but he does not describe what surrounds it. To find a palace is quite an unusual scene as if the place were uprooted from its environment and put in that peculiar place where life has not ever known a path to it. That mysterious river, Alph, is also described far from what naturally associates it:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

(ll.3-5)

The image of the river in this isolated place is shrouded with some romantic touches. It is full of mystery and savageness. Rivers are usually surrounded by beautiful scenes where other elements of nature such as birds and animals have a room. But here, Coleridge gives a sense of loneliness through the imaginary scene of that mysterious river which flows and wastes its waters and beauty in an empty space. There is no sign of life in and around it, as if water were not one of the main elements of the creation. Then, the theme of loneliness deepens with the emergence of the vision of a damsel with a dulcimer. Now it tackles a human being rather than inanimate things:

A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

*It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played
Singing of Mount Abora.
(ll.37-41)*

The speaker recalls a vision of a damsel from Abyssinia, sings of Mount Abora; a high place or mountain of God. She accompanies herself on a dulcimer⁽¹⁴⁾. In fact, this image does not suit the collective life. She is singing alone to the mountain of God and in her loneliness there is an indirect sense of superiority or sacredness. In this sense, loneliness is glorified by the poet and there is an indirect message which is initially associated with his own dilemma, the dilemma of loneliness.

The other image of loneliness can be clearly seen in the appearance of the poet who was thought to come from other world and times:

*And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.
(ll.48-54)*

The poet seems here to be like some primitive figure who has to be kept apart from society. In his loneliness and sacred inspiration, he seems dangerous, inspired by a paradisaical vision that one would find it beautiful and fearful⁽¹¹⁾. The primitiveness leads to go back to the ancient Greece and to delve into the subject of poetic inspiration, a matter which seems beyond the scope of the subject.

In his "Dejection: An Ode", Coleridge shows his own loneliness and announces a cut from collective life. This loneliness is not expressed directly. The first pronoun dominates the sense of solitude throughout the poem. Coleridge, alone, meditates the real meaning of the universe and existence. He thinks over whatever surrounds him including: the moon, the stars, and the happy beautiful nature:

*I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!*
(*Dejection: An Ode, ll.37-38*)

“I”, here, represents that lonely soul who finds no one or nothing to accompany him. This lonely soul feels estranged from his real world and looks for something he does not know and never finds its joy.

Loneliness also appears through different images. In the seventh stanza, loneliness appears through the image of the “lost child”:

*‘Tis of a little child
Upon a lonesome wild,
Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
And now screams loud, and hopes to make her
Mother hear.*

(ll.121-125)

In fact, the lost child is really bewildered and she does not know what to do in her loneliness as grief and fear are the only companions. This bewilderment makes her practise moaning where her voice would not move more than a very short distance hoping that her mother may hear and come to save her. This child is in fact Coleridge himself who is now moaning, now screaming, waiting for the savior’s hand which could bring him back to the collective life⁽¹²⁾. Hence, loneliness plays the same role of death in so far as it isolates man from public life and forces him to live alone.

2. Alienation:

It is fairly enough that the sense of alienation can be part of the dilemma of death. There is a close relationship between them, for sense of alienation is one aspect of death. However, it is difficult to put a distinction line between alienation and loneliness for the two are basically related to each other. Both are essentially based on isolation from others or social life or withdrawal from ones fellows and society.

Coleridge is an alienated man for two reasons: first, alienation is a quite common sense in Romanticism and most

of the romantic poets express it directly and indirectly. Second, it is concerned with his own life. Throughout his life, he suffers much. His domestic life is unstable. There is no mutual understanding between him and his wife and this copes with his frustrated love for Sara Hutchinson⁽¹³⁾. His illness which added suffering to his disturbed life played a vital role in drawing him far from the common life. These problems make him meditate deeply over his existential value, a matter which definitely leads to alienation. He lives this state of alienation and expresses it in his wistful call to Wordsworths when he was in Germany:

*William, my head and my heart,
dear William and Dear Dorothea!
You have all in each other; but I am
Lonely and want you!*⁽¹⁴⁾

It is a wish of being alone as the following narrative tells us about his running away from the Wordsworths:

*To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love I love indeed*⁽¹⁵⁾

Coleridge left Scotland, but to be apart from those he most loves deepens his sense of alienation. He is homeless moving from land to land carrying with him his sufferings and illness. His suffering deepens his sense of alienation which becomes part of him that cannot be separated⁽¹⁶⁾. His genius enables him to express his alienation in his writings in different ways. Sometimes, he talks about alienation directly, other times through images and symbols, or through his characters. Alienation appears in the first lines of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

*It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
— "By they long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?
(Ancient Mariner, ll.1-4)*

The poem opens with a scene of alienation. The ancient mariner stops one of the wedding guests and alienates him from his fellows. With his skinny hand and glittering eye, he stops by force that young man and prevents him from attending the celebration of marriage⁽¹⁷⁾.

From the very beginning, the sense of alienation is quite clear. The mariner is alone, alienated from people and from the atmosphere around him as if he belonged to another time and world, while the people, as a group, celebrate the renewal of life, represented by marriage. He is old and they are young. He is carrying a sad terrifying story, and thinking of death; the people are happy, full of life and enjoying the wedding celebration. In addition, the story of the ancient mariner, the way through which he narrates the story, and the setting of the recitation all foreshadow the atmosphere of alienation which dominates the story.

In the second stanza, part one, the young man still thinks of happiness in the bridegroom's doors:

*The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next to kin:
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din.*
(ll.5-8)

The happiness represented by the ritual of celebration contrasts with what the ancient mariner is going to tell concerning his terrible voyage, a matter which evokes the sense of alienation.

Alienation, as it is mentioned previously, can be expressed in different ways: directly and indirectly. In stanzas number 16 and 17 alienation appears in more than an aspect:

*At length did cross an Albatross,
Through the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name,
It ate the food it ne'er had eat,*
(ll.63-67)

In these lines, there are two or more aspects of alienation. The albatross for instance, is alienated; he comes alone as if he were alienated from his group. He also eats, drinks and stays with them and this is an unusual behaviour for a bird. In fact, this bird, albatross, comes from (fog) and this word refers to the mystery enfolding him. Hence, alienation is shown indirectly here through the place or environment to which the bird frequently comes which definitely does not suit him.

Though in “Kubla Khan” alienation appears in a different way and somehow far from death, yet to be unusual and apart from society it means death⁽¹⁷⁾. A close reading of the last stanza of “Kubla Khan” and a return to some religious and mythical narratives make the relationship between death and alienation quite possible:

*A damse with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
(Kubla Khan, ll.37-41)*

There is an aspect of similarity between the poet and this lonely African lady. Both suffer from sense of alienation. She is singing alone in a place far from man’s habitations so is the poet who is wholly alienated at home when he wrote this dreamful poem.

Moreover, in the general history and tradition of singing, this art (singing) is known as collective activity from its beginning till now. So, one may ask why this maid is singing alone?. The only answer could be that this action is due to the fact that a man tends to sing songs when he is alone in order to compensate for his loss of company and “to enter more closely into communion”⁽¹⁸⁾. This is what often practised by lonely persons such as shepherds, travellers, Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper”, and Coleridge’s Abyssinian Maid. As a result, one can conclude that the maid is socially alienated, a matter which appears even in the structure of the poem moving in different

and sometimes opposite spaces. However, the picture he portrays for this man alienated him from the ordinary world and shows him as a person who belongs to another world and therefore people avoid him:

*And all who should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!*
(ll.48-49)

Then people's attitudes towards him move to another aspect. They regard him as a sacred creature⁽³⁶⁾:

*His flashing eyes, floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise*
(ll.50-54)

From the very beginning, the sense of alienation appears in the Coleridge's epigraph to "Dejection" which consists of lines rearranged from the Percy Version of Sir Patrick Spence:

*Late, Late yestreen I saw the new Moon
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.*
(Dejection: An Old, an epigraph)

Coleridge uses the epigraph in order to show fondness to past which in turn means that past is brighter than present. Hence, he moves by his spirit to the past in order to escape the dark present he lives in. In other words, he is not satisfied with his time and place, instead he looks back to a series of past memories. In this sense, he is self-alienated.

The epigraph, however, has another significance. It prepares for an ironic reversal at the end of the first stanza since the 'deadly' storm, fearful in the epigraph, becomes a wish in the last five lines in stanza one:

*And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,*

***Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!***
(*Dejection: An Ode*, ll.15-20)

In the above lines, the sense of alienation deepens. The sound of wind was once positive in so far as it is used to liberate his soul and gift him with the power he needs. Moreover, it turns to be passive “Might startle his dull pain”, and it may stir the pain sometimes he forgets about it⁽¹⁹⁾. Again the contrast between past and present makes the poet an alienated man. His body is in a certain time and his soul is dissatisfied with it and lives in some bygone times where his body and soul are in full agreement.

Coleridge, in this poem, is certainly obsessed with his self-consciousness, contrived that his soul is no more harmonized with surrounding beautiful nature:

***I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!***
(ll.37-38)

These two lines, in fact, reflect the poet’s inner state of mind. He has gazed blankly on the natural beautiful images and he could watch them forever, but could not feel them. The poet, as a human being, is part of nature and subject to its physical laws but here. He is unable to relate himself with nature. He is set apart, and while being apart he will be alienated. His alienation has made him feel separated from nature, and this causes pain and sorrow⁽²⁰⁾.

In this poem, Coleridge gives expression to an experience of double consciousness. There is a contrast between his sense-perceptions which are vivid and his soul, inner state which is unhappy and faint. He sees, but cannot feel. By ‘seeing’ he means perceiving, and by ‘feeling’ he means implying activity. He suffers, but the pain is dull, and he wishes it were keen, for so he should awake from lethargy and react with nature again. But nothing from outside can restore him⁽²¹⁾. Hence, the poet is “completely alienated from nature to the point of near death”⁽²²⁾.

In the sixth stanza, the contrast which produces the sense of alienation is quietly from present to past. The poet talks about past where everything was beautiful and when he was indulged with nature and felt its beauty, and now everything has been turned up-side-down:

*There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:*

*For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, and my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
(ll.76-83)*

The poet's fondness to the past and the state of nostalgia to the days that will never come back on one hand and his drab present on the other deepen the sense of alienation in him and draws him far from the busy life in which man should be involved.

According to what has been mentioned and discussed, alienation can be looked upon as an aspect of death; psychological death of course. Death, in its simple meaning, refers to be parted or separated from others. Alienation in its turn is a state of being alienated from others either physically or spiritually. However, the two aspects: loneliness and alienation are twin, initially associated to each other, though one might lead to the other, yet they spring from the same source and lead finally to be some aspects of death, in the psychological sense.

Notes

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18. John Spencer Hill, pp.170-2.

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ملخص البحث

الوحدة والغربة كمظهرين من مظاهر الموت بالمعنى النفسي في شعر كولرج
*أكرم أحمد شريف

يعالج هذا البحث فكرة الموت كما ترد على لسان الشاعر الروحاني الإنكليزي صاموئيل تايلر كولورج، حيث يربط الشاعر بين فكرتي الوحدة والاعتراب كمظهرين من مظاهر الموت حيث تكثر هذه الفكرة في قصائد كثيرة كتبها من مثل البحار العجوز وقبلاني خان.

* قسم اللغة الانكليزية- كلية الاداب/ جامعة الموصل.