

# Imagination and fancy in coleridge's biographia literaria



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Imagination and Fancy in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria Coleridge, in his essay "Biographia Literaria", rejecting the empiricist assumption that the mind was tabula rasa on which external experience and sense impressions were imprinted, stored, recalled, combined both come from respectively the Latin word 'imaginatio' and Greek word 'phantasia'. Coleridge defines imagination by saying that "The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary.

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degrees, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate, or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to dealize and to unify.

It is essentially vital, even as all objects are essentially fixed and dead. " Coleridge either the imagination into Primary and Secondary and draws a distinction between creative acts those are unconscious and intentional and deliberate acts. Primary imagination was for Coleridge, the "necessary imagination" as it "automatically balances and fuses the innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the one receives through the senses. " Secondary imagination, on the other hand, represents a superior faculty which could only be associated with artistic genius.

It is more active and conscious in its working. It is at the root of all poetic activity. The secondary imagination selects and orders the raw material and reshapes and remodels it into objects of beauty. Thus it is "a shaping and modifying power." It "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate." Primary imagination is the consciousness shared by all men, while the secondary imagination is limited to poets. "Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definitives. Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space.

But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive but its materials readymade from the law of association. "So, Coleridge seems to be saying that one can use fancy as a kind of power to create memory mosaics or collages, rearranging what we've experienced into a new contribution or share to suit our fancy. Coleridge has distinguished between Fancy and Imagination in the following ways: # Fancy in Coleridge's eyes was employed for tasks those were 'passive', 'mechanical', the accumulation of facts and documentation of what is seen.

Fancy, Coleridge argued, was "too often adulterator and counterfeit of memory." (59) The imagination, on the other hand, was 'vital' and transformative, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation". For Coleridge it was the imagination that was responsible for acts that were truly creative and inventive and, in turn, that identified true instances of fine or noble art. (60) # Fancy is "the faculty of mere images or impressions, as imagination is the faculty of intuitions. "# Fancy is light and playful, while Imagination is grave and solemn. Fancy was concerned with <https://assignbuster.com/imagination-and-fancy-in-coleridges-biographia-literaria/>

the mechanical operations of the mind, those which are responsible for the passive accumulation of data and shortage of such data in the memory.

Imagination on the other hand, described the "mysterious power," which extracted from such data, "hidden ideas and meaning" # Fancy sports with the definite and static images and doesn't modify them; while imagination dissolves and reshapes them into new wholes. # For Coleridge, fancy is the attribute of poetic genius, but imagination is its soul, which transforms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

Fancy is equated with a mechanical mixture and Imagination is equated with a chemical compound. In a mechanical mixture a number of ingredients are brought together. They are mixed up, but they do not lose their individual properties, they will exist as separate identities. In a chemical compound, on the other hand, the different ingredients combine to form something new. The different ingredients no longer exist as separate identities. They lose their respective properties and fuse together to create something new and entirely different.

A compound is an act of creation; while a mixture is merely a bringing together of a number of separate elements. Thus imagination creates new shapes and forms of beauty by digesting and unifying the different impressions it receives from the external world. Fancy is not creative, it is a kind of memory; it arbitrarily brings together images and even when brought together, they continue to retain their separate and individual properties. They receive no coloring or modification from the mind. It is merely mechanical juxtaposition, and not a chemical fusion.

Coleridge explains the point by quoting two passages from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. The following lines from this poem serve to illustrate fancy: "Full gently now she takes him by the hand  
A lily prisoned in a hold of snow  
Or ivory in an alabaster band  
So white a friend engirds so white a foe. In these lines images drawn from memory, but they do not interpenetrate into one another. The following kind from the same poem, illustrate the power and function of imagination: "Look! How a bright star shooteth from the sky  
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye. How many images and feelings", says Coleridge, "are here brought together without effort and without discord-the beauty of Adones - the rapidity of the flight - the yearning yet helplessness of the unamoured gazes- and a shadowy, ideal character thrown over the whole. " Coleridge's brief discussion of imagination and fancy in *Biographia Literaria* has been called, "perhaps the most famous single prose passage in all of English literature, yet . . . Also one of the most baffling ". He was also one first critic to distinguish between them and define their respective roles.