

The union of
opposing elements:
poems by wordsworth
and coleridge



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The Romantic Era was a time when people embraced imagination, emotion, and freedom – quite a contrast to the preceding Neoclassic Era, which emphasized the values of reason, judgment, and authority. The values of the so-called Romantics are embodied in the poetry which developed during the period. Romantic poets, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, composed poetry filled with passion and intense emotion. Both poets also incorporated into their works two elements which came to exemplify Romantic poetry: an intense love of nature, in which man interacts and becomes unified with nature, and, as Coleridge stated, “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant elements or qualities.” This balance of opposing elements, or contradictions, is a main theme in two famous Romantic works: “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways,” one of Wordsworth’s renowned “Lucy Poems”, and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” a literary ballad by Coleridge. The first contradiction in Wordsworth’s poem is present both in the title and in the very first line, which read similarly “She [Lucy] dwelt among the untrodden ways.” Observe the words “dwelt” and “untrodden” – a dwelling place is a home, and a home is something familiar and welcoming. An “untrodden way” is something unfamiliar and strange – in fact, it is almost the exact opposite of a home, or a dwelling. Lucy, however, brought about the union of these two contradictory elements – she made her home in an unfamiliar place, where others did not venture. This is the first example of the union of opposing elements. A second example of contradictory ideas is the theme of the individual versus the general in this poem. Generally, people did not know Lucy – “She lived unknown, and few could know/ When Lucy ceased to be.”

This shows that Lucy was not very important to others, and she was
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something of a loner. Lucy was, however, of great importance to the poet: “But she is in her grave, and, oh,/ The difference to me!” This shows that the narrator greatly cherished Lucy – he saw her as a “violet” and a “star” – although others did not. The two ideas, therefore, of being of great importance to an individual and of little significance to the general, are united within the context of the poem. Another element which contradicts the idea of Lucy being of great importance to the narrator is Lucy’s not having anyone of great importance to her. Wordsworth describes Lucy as being “A maid whom there were none to praise/ And very few to love...” In other words, Lucy cared for no one, but the narrator cared deeply for her – “The difference to me!” The opposing ideas of passion versus indifference – the narrator’s passion for Lucy and Lucy’s indifference towards others – are also united in the context of this poem. A final example of the union of opposing elements in this poem is Lucy’s beauty in comparison to her loneliness. Wordsworth describes Lucy as “A violet by a mossy stone/ Half hidden from the eye!/ Fair as a star, when only one/ Is shining in the sky.” In these lines, the poet describes Lucy’s beauty, inner or outer, and her uniqueness. Despite Lucy’s beauty, however, she is all alone, outside the bounds of society. This idea is contradictory in two ways. First of all, Lucy may be “Fair as a star,” but there is not other star in the sky, and she may be like a “violet,” but she is isolated, beside a “mossy stone.” She has no one around her to observe or acknowledge her beauty, and she goes unnoticed by everyone except the poet. This is the contradictory idea of beauty versus blindness – meaning the blindness of others to Lucy’s beauty – which is united in the context of Lucy’s life. A second way in which Lucy’s beauty and isolation give rise to opposing elements is how Lucy’s isolation

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makes her more beautiful to the narrator. If there is only one star shining in the sky, there are no other stars to compare it to, and that star is more beautiful by itself than when it is among many other stars. A violet, also, is more beautiful by itself than when it is among a field of violets. The reason, therefore, that Lucy is so beautiful and makes such a difference to the poet is because her separation from others makes her more unique in his eyes. What makes Lucy so special to the poet, therefore, is her isolation, the same thing which causes her to be of no significance to others. This is another contradictory idea which is united in the context of Lucy's life. In Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," there are many examples of unions between opposing or discordant elements. The first example is in the very beginning, when a wedding is taking place. Weddings are commitments, or unions, between males and females, or opposite elements. The wedding imagery which continues throughout the ballad is a constant symbol of the union between opposite elements. A more specific example of a union between opposite elements is when the Mariner and the Wedding Guest come together. The two men are very much opposites - the Wedding Guest is cultured, elegant, and within the bounds of society, while the Mariner is rugged, life-hardened, and an outcast. Their discordant qualities are united as the Wedding Guest listens to the Mariner's story. There is a double contradiction which develops in the relationship between the Mariner and the Guest. The Mariner, a rugged outcast, is actually the more sagacious and learned of the two - although the Wedding Guest may seem to be more cultured and civilized, he is the one who needs to be taught a lesson by the rough, sea-tossed Mariner. The lesson the Mariner teaches is this: " He prayeth well, who loveth well/ Both man and bird and beast/ He prayeth best,

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who loveth best/ All things both great and small;/ For the dear God who loveth us/ He made and loveth all." These words are certainly not spoken by a vulgar and crude barbarian, which most would have considered a mariner to be. The opposing elements of the Mariner and the Guest are united in two ways, therefore. The more superficial opposing qualities of the Guest's elegance and the Mariner's ruggedness are physically united by the telling of the Mariner's story. The underlying opposing qualities of the Mariner's wisdom and the Guest's need to be taught are united as the Mariner teaches a lesson. He evidently teaches successfully, for the Wedding Guest is described at the end as " A sadder and a wiser man,/ He rose the morrow morn." Many more unions of discordant or opposing elements exist in the Mariner's story. One of the first is brought about by the appearance of the Albatross. The Albatross represents both God - " As if it had been a Christian soul,/ We hailed it in God's name" - and nature, two elements which oppose man, who is divorced from both nature and God. The Albatross, however, is united with the men on the ship when it follows them and perches on their ship for nine days - " The Albatross did follow,/ And every day, for food or play,/ Came to the mariners' hollo!" Thus is the union between God and man and nature and man. This union is ended when the Mariner kills the Albatross. After the Mariner destroys the Albatross, many unfortunate events ensue. The ship is becalmed for many days, and later on another ship approaches, manned by Life-in-Death and Death-in-Life. Not only are these two characters contradictory by themselves (for how can there be death in life and life in death?), but they are the exact opposites of one another. They are united, however, in a mutual activity, a dice game, which they play to win the crew of the Mariner's ship. This is a more literal union of two

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contradictory ideas. There are more examples of union between life and death. After the dice game, in which Death-in-Life won the whole crew, save the Mariner, who was won by Life-in-Death, Death-in-Life kills all the crew. Later, however, these dead men are raised – “ They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,/ Nor spake, nor moved their eyes...” The men then proceed to control the ship, each performing his own duty. Each man represents the unity of life and death, as each is a dead man who has come back to life. The Mariner, up until the point where he reaches unity with God, is another representation of life versus death. Although he is literally alive and walking, he is spiritually dead inside. It was for this reason that he shot the Albatross, which was a gift from God, a Christian soul. The Mariner, therefore, embodies and unites the two elements of life and death. As mentioned above, the Mariner at one point reaches unity with God, as well as nature. This happens only after Life-in-Death does her work on him and causes him to repent. He had previously opposed nature and God, both symbolized by the Albatross, when he shot the glorious bird. He also opposed nature by despising the sea-creatures he observed, which he described as “ A thousand thousand slimy things,” and by cursing the “ rotting sea.” He opposed God once more when he “ tried to pray;/ But or ever a prayer had gushed,/ A wicked whisper came, and made/ My heart as dry as dust.” When the Mariner, after being “ worked on” by Life-in-Death, sees the creatures again, he has a completely different reaction: “ Oh happy living things! no tongue/ Their beauty might declare./ A spring of love gushed from my heart,/ And I blessed them unaware...” This apparent change in the Mariner’s attitude indicates that he has reached unity with nature, something which he had previously opposed. He also reaches unity with God at this time: “ The selfsame moment I could

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pray...” The Albatross, which he had worn around his neck as a symbol of his sin, then falls off, indicating that he is absolved of his sins. At this point, the Mariner reaches unity with the two things he had opposed. From these examples, it is evident that Romantic poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, considered the union of opposing or discordant elements or qualities to be an important aspect of poetry, and perhaps an important aspect of life. The two poets, however, interpreted this union very differently. Wordsworth united such elements as passion and indifference and beauty and loneliness within the context of his poems – in other words, these discordant qualities had union because they coexisted in a similar environment, in this case Lucy’s life. Coleridge, however, saw the union of discordant elements not simply as their coexisting, but as their coming together and being resolved, as in the case when the Mariner reaches union with the sea by coming to love and cherish it. The two poets’ attitudes towards the meaning of union reflect their outlook on life. Most likely, Wordsworth, who never seems to offer a resolution of the opposing elements in his poem, was a person who believed that discord was something natural and unchangeable with which we must learn to coexist. On the contrary, Coleridge in his poem is constantly resolving the discordant elements and bringing them together in a peaceful manner. His outlook on life must have been more positive than that of Wordsworth, and he must have believed that all forms of discord can be somehow brought into union, or resolved.