

Dejection: An Ode, A Lament over the Poet's Declining Power of Imagination

Parastoo Salavati

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages, Sanandaj Payam-e-Noor University, Sanandaj, Kurdistan, Iran. E-mail: parastoo_salavati@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article traces Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode* as a reflection of his despair in his personal life and his indication concerning his declining power of imagination. *Dejection: An Ode* was composed when the poet faced a lot of complexities in his life. Although Coleridge laments the fading of his poetic power, this poem is considered as one of his best lyrics. The poet feels dejection and grief over his loss of imagination and poetic ability.

Similar to the beginning quote in which Sir Patrick anticipates with fear the coming of a destructive storm and inevitable death, here, Coleridge, at a quiet night, longs for a storm to stimulate his poetic power because he believes that he has lost his creative power and happiness in life.

Keywords: Coleridge, Dejection: An Ode, Declining Power Of Imagination, Despair.

INTRODUCTION

Dejection: An Ode is considered as a Pindaric ode in 340 lines inscribed to Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister in law, in 1802, in the form of verse letter. Later in 1817 the abridged version of it, consisting of 139 lines, was published by Coleridge. It was composed when the poet had a collection of complexities such as physical and mental illness, addiction and family problems. This poem is often compared with Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* and is known as one of Coleridge's greatest lyric poems. Samuel Taylor Coleridge starts writing this ode as a response to Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*.

Like Wordsworth's ode, this poem laments the fading of poetic power and imagination and the loss of a creative and energizing relationship with nature and the feeling of emptiness. *Dejection: An Ode* follows Coleridge's liberty in language. He has "grief" over his supposed loss of the ability to imagine. The calm night at the beginning of the poem refers to his static imagination and longing for storm is a wish to regain his dynamic imagination.

Coleridge situates himself as the actual subject of his poem and presents himself within the poem. When the wind stops blowing, his power of imagination dies. Coleridge draws pleasure and melancholy between nature and man. He claims that perceptions and emotions create nature and the world man lives in, and that man can overcome difficulties if he has joy, the ideal condition of the mind.

THE STUDY

In *Dejection: An Ode*, Coleridge uses his ideas about poetry as expressed in his *Biographica Literaria* and his other works. In this poem he talks about the best language for poetry. He describes whether lofty or common language is suitable for poetry. Coleridge believes that, when writing poetry, one should use imagination to actually create new ideas, or at least reunify old ideas into new relationships. He believed that, emotional experiences can be a great assistance to the poet. Depression is the very subject of Coleridge's ode. He takes depression as a lack of joy. As a victim to an opium addiction, and as a hopeless lover, he felt a great deal of depression. In this ode, he bitterly laments about the death of imagination and poetic ability. Accordingly, "the theme of Dejection is the failure of the poetic power and imagination. His "genial spirit" fails, his creative powers are lost and he is left depressed" (Abjadian, 2002).

Coleridge not only repeats, but also puts into practice his beliefs about poetry in *Dejection: An Ode*, as he does with other poems. He uses the language that best fit what he is expressing. Similar to his ideas in *Biographica Literaria*, here, too, he believes that metaphors using common sights and sounds can bring new life to old truths. He uses his “imagination” rather than his “fancy” in writing this poem, to actually create rather than imitate. He also believes that emotional experiences can assist the imagination in the creation of poetry.

Dejection: An Ode begins with a stanza form an old folk ballad that tells of the courage of Sir Patrick Spence in confronting a murderous storm. In this ballad which is about curse and punishment, Sir Patrick is the best seafarer. He is ordered to navigate the king’s ship, but Sir Patrick and the other mariners know that a caustic storm is approaching. The king orders a deadly command by which they are approaching death. Consequently the king and all aboard the ship die in the same way that Coleridge talks about the death of his imagination.

In the quoted stanza the speaker predicts a storm because the night before he saw “the new Moon / With the old Moon in her arms”, that is, a crescent moon that dimly illuminated the rest of the moon. The “new moon” with a ring around it distorts his view of the stars, and like Wordsworth, he predicts a later time when he would not be able to see them at all and the power of imagination would die.

Like a conversational poem, the ode starts on a quiet note, commenting on the weather, which is calm at the moment, but is on to be stormy. The poet longs for the wind to start blowing; he feels dull and hopes that the buffeting of the wind will arouse him and enliven his soul. Thus, as well as being a natural force, the wind also represents the creative energy or power that the poet has felt before but now lacks. In this way, the whole poem can be considered as an invocation of that creative power which can be obtained by the power of wind or storm.

The first stanza is a miniature of the poem. The first sixteen lines begin with an apparent fear of the prospect of stormy winds: “...winds, that ply a busier trade”(line 4), that would be destructive for the persona. From that apparent fear the poem moves to an apparent welcome of self-destruction and death wish: “...this Aeolian lute,/ Which better far were mute.” (lines 8-7) It is at the last lines of this stanza that the poem presents a fully expressed longing for the storm: “And oh! That even now the guest were swelling, / And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!” (lines 16-15) He prefers an end to “this dull pain” so that he can “move and live”(line 20). He believes that he would like to hasten the predicted, active, suffering because then he would have more energy to do something to take his mind of it. In this way the reader is also reminded of the truth that anticipation of suffering is often seems worse than the event itself.

In the second stanza, the poet describes his present grief. Here he creates a parallel between the quiet evening before the storm and his own absence of feeling. He addresses a lady (Sara Hutchinson) and gives his ode a dramatic function. Coleridge tells her that he has spent the evening gazing at the sunset. He describes it but complains that he is merely seeing it, not feeling it. He believes that he has experienced a mental decay from which there is no hope of reversal. He is detached from nature, and emotionally dead to its influence. In other words, “in the second stanza the “grief without a pang” is defined in several ways, all of which more or less plainly refer to the general paralysis of his feeling failure” (Fields, 1967). The lady to whom Coleridge addresses is his last hope. This lady has got a radiance that Coleridge cannot obtain anymore. The persona believes that through this lady, he can regain joy.

In the third stanza, the poet continues his lament that mere “outward forms” cannot generate the passion that drives his creativity. “My genial spirits fail;/ And what can these avail/ To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?” (lines 39-41) Here he believes that nobody, even nature can

help him. Subsequently “any spontaneous movement of feeling, even a sharp pang of grief, would be welcome, and yet he is totally incapable of it. After two stanzas he describes what he has lost is joy and gives a philosophical explanation of its loss” (Suther, 1960).

In the fourth Stanza, he explains that the creative imagination makes nature beautiful. A “glory” in the poet’s soul animates the “cold world” of material objects. Here, Coleridge uses the metaphor of a marriage to explain the relationship of poet and nature. The poet is the bridegroom. Here he employs in a highly organic way the symbols which were perpetually associated in his mind with the poetic experience, light and wind. This stanza may be read as an objective description of the poetic relation between man and nature and the work of art. By reading this stanza, one realizes that this stanza is not just an objective description of the poetic relation between man and nature, but it is also the reflection of real experiences and failures of his life. It also constitutes a metamorphosis of his earlier beliefs regarding the poetic experience.

In the fifth stanza, He believes that the soul itself must issue forth and wed nature in order to create. Coleridge says that the imagination can harmonize with reason and emotion, and therefore be able to create, only for a few people “in their purest hour”(line 65). This is why he says in his *Biographica* that imagination cannot always create, but it can always idealize and unify, that is, it can connect seemingly contradictory ideas or emotions in a meaningful way. Here, the poet is still talking to the lady and wishes her the joy that results from the wedding of nature and the soul. This heavenly joy is a special gift that makes the natural world beautiful and glorious. Here the lady is associated with joy that can regenerate nature. The wedding metaphor that is used in this stanza is an integral element of the whole section of the poem. Joy is the spirit and the power which give us the new earth and heaven. It can also represent Coleridge’s idea about imagination. In other words, “joy is that frame of mind which enables us to desire and consummate a personal union with an inanimate object and in doing so to cause the object to come alive” (Suther, 1960).

In stanza six, the poet looks back on his youth as a time of joy and hope. The past years that the poet concerns are childhood memories. Now he feels down and frustrated as a result of his failed marriage and his loss of imaginative power. This is the cause of his dejection. He has moved from joy and imaginative creativity to the sorrows of his current situation, in which he feels loss and dejection.

In the seventh stanza, the poet rouses himself to the “viper thoughts” of depression (line 94). He becomes aware that the calm weather described at the beginning of the poem has been replaced by a wild storm. The wind is shrieking through the landscape and is creating a crazy music in the Aeolian harp that is framed in a window of his cottage. He imagines that the wind is telling a sad, violent story, perhaps of an orphan girl lost in a storm. The sounds alternate between screams and moans, inspiring terror and pathos. It is in this stanza that the poet has recovered his poetic creativity for limited moments.

The final stanza brings us to midnight. The dejected poet cannot sleep. He prays for sweet sleep for the lady and wishes her joy. He hopes she will enjoy the uplifting, joyful spirit that has abandoned him. The closing lines of the ode restore the calm of the opening, but the calm has been transferred to the lady. In this stanza Coleridge passes the legacy joy on lady while his share is sorrow and loss. For him, depression and dejection are internal and cannot be changed.

In this poem, the first two stanzas, about “quiet grief”, are related to a quiet emotion. They focus on the image of a sky before a thunderstorm. But the last two stanzas, about when the metaphorical storm comes, use many more images in quick sequence. Coleridge has unified this poem by having the end part about “agony by torture..”(line 98) in contrast with the beginning’s “dull pain”(line 20) of apathy. The metaphor of a child (lines 125-121) that screams in pain and then moans in hopelessness helps unify the work by connecting both kinds of pain in the same person.

In *Dejection: An Ode*, the relationship between mind and nature is defined through the specific rejection of fallacious versions of it. Coleridge believes that mind cannot take its feeling from nature. He emphasizes the division between his own mind and the beauty of the natural world. In his viewpoint, mind must be so suffused with its own joy that it opens up to the real, independent, and immortal joy of nature.

CONCLUSION

Dejection: An Ode begins with a fear from a destructive storm, but in fact the poet looks forward to this sever storm because in his view point this storm is superior to stagnation. The poet, like the ancient mariner, entangled in the ocean, perceives everything but does not feel anything according to his static soul and declining of his creative powers. Consequently the poet and every aspect of nature have become static.

While the external world can be viewed by dynamic and creative mind and at the same time, dynamic imagination gives meaning to nature, here the poet has lost his creative power and poetic imagination. A loss that, according to Coleridge himself, has occurred as the consequence of following philosophy and complex researches in metaphysics.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Name and Surname: Parastoo Salavati
Affiliation: Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages, Sanandaj Payam-e-Noor University
Residence: Sanandaj, Kurdistan, Iran.
E-mail: parastoo_salavati@yahoo.com

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