



A Critical Appreciation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Eolian Harp*

Mr. Arul Darwin,

Assistant Professor of English, MANO College, Kanniyakumari.

Abstract

The poem The Eolian Harp was addressed to Sarah Fricker whom the poet was about to marry. An Eolian harp was considered an indispensable possession for every poet. It was usually placed in a casement. The poets loved and valued it greatly. The music drawn from it by the breath of nature was identified with the natural genius of the poet. In this poem, Coleridge says that the lute is lying lengthwise in the window. It is lovingly touched by the wayward wind and is producing a sweet musical sound. The music is sometimes low and sometimes loud, depending on the force of the wind. The music is as sweet and charming as the one produced by the fairies in the evening, when they glide on gentle winds from fairyland. The poem shows the wayward nature of the poet. The poet's mind wanders and he says that all the objects of this living universe may be regarded as organic Harps of different shapes and designs. They are moved to think when they are stimulated and inspired by the all-pervading spirit of God. The poet confirms his faith in the orthodox Christian doctrines, and closes the poem by expressing his feelings of gratitude to God for giving him peace and all desires.

Keywords: Coleridge, Sara, Eolian Harp, Music

The poem *The Eolian Harp* is a fine poem of music and melody. An Eolian harp was considered an indispensable possession for every poet. It was usually placed in a casement. The poets loved and valued it greatly. The music drawn from it by the breath of nature was identified with the natural genius of the poet. In this poem, Coleridge says that the lute is lying lengthwise in the window. It is lovingly touched by the wayward wind and is producing a sweet musical sound. The music is sometimes low and sometimes loud, depending on the force of the wind. The music is as sweet and charming as the one produced by the fairies in the evening, when they glide on gentle winds from fairyland. The poem shows the wayward nature of the poet. He does not concentrate on any one point. His mind drifts from one subject to another. He begins the poem by addressing Sara who was sitting with him her cheek resting on his arm. He then describes the natural scenery at this time and then passes to the lute, which is placed in the window. From there his mind wanders to the one life, which pervades the universe. It is found in all the objects of nature, and in all motion; in fact it is the essence of all nature. It exists within us as well as outside of us. It is moving everywhere: it is the source of joy everywhere. The poet's mind again wanders and he says



that all the objects of this living universe may be regarded as organic Harps of different shapes and designs. They are moved to think when they are stimulated and inspired by the all-pervading spirit of God. The poet now becomes conscious by the disapproving looks of his beloved that he had digressed, and returns and confirms his faith in the orthodox Christian doctrines, and closes the poem by expressing his feelings of gratitude to God for giving him peace, contentment, and Sara, the object of all his desires.

The linguistic pattern of the poem proves that it is written in a simple and direct language. The poet experiences a great joy in the company of his beloved, and expresses it in direct language. There are not any unnecessary adornments, no passages for their own sake, which do not advance the theme of the poem. Coleridge's poetry is famous for its verbal melody and witchery of language. In absolute melody, he has no superior, among the English poets. In fact, he shows a greater sensitiveness to music than any other English poet except Milton does. In *The Eolian Harp*, there are such beautiful lines as *Oh ! the one life within us and abroad or And what if all of animated nature*. Such lines clearly reveal his command over the language, simplicity of diction, and sensitiveness to verbal music.

The poem abounds in beautiful similes. As it is a love poem, most of the similes are based on love. The poet is sitting in the company of his beloved and imagines all objects also in terms of love. The harp is touched by the breeze like *some coy maid half yielding to her lover*. The breeze then blows a little more forcefully and produces a louder sound on the harp. It is compared to:

*such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight Elfin's make, when they at eve
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land...* (EH)

The poem shows the poet's sensuous enjoyment of nature. Often he lies down at noontime on the midway slope of the yonder hills and enjoys the beauty of nature with half-closed eyes. All of animated nature and transitory nature of his philosophic speculations is compared to:

*Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.* (EH)

The Eolian Harp (1795) has been called perfect of Coleridge's early poems. It is one of his conversation poems. Most of the poems of this group belong to the years 1795-98, but



Coleridge used the form intermittently over a period of twelve years, the last of them, To William Wordsworth being written in 1807. For him, the form of a conversation poem had some attraction in his early years. He was temperamentally incapable of making the sustained effort essential to produce a great philosophic poem. By writing these conversation poems in his early years, he kept alive his poetic powers and continued to hope that someday he would be fit to undertake a great work. Then, in a conversation poem, themes could be taken up, developed, dropped, resumed and shifts of tone could be made, much more acceptably than in most other poetic forms. These early poems are remarkable for their sensitive recording of nature, their tentative exploration of ideas and concern for self-analysis. The Conversation poems are addressed to some person. The poet speaks as if he is talking to that person, although that person may not speak a single word. In *The Eolian Harp*, the person addressed is Sarah Fricker, sister to Southey's fiancée, when he subsequently married in October 1795. The poem does not possess a unity of thought or theme. The poet's mind shift from one idea to another, and ultimately the poem closes with the poet is accepting the traditional orthodox Christian beliefs of his beloved.

The Eolian Harp celebrates the poet's first happiness in love. He had fallen in love with Sarah Fricker, sister to Edith who later on married Southey. The poem begins and ends with a reference to Sarah Fricker. Its theme shows enormous range and variety. It moves from the tranquil beauty of the cottage at Clevedon to all of animated nature' from the simple lute clasped in the casement to a fairyland, from an intuition of life's oneness to personal confession of work and a need for religion. The sudden transitions and varied themes come from the associations formed in the mind of the poet as he contemplates his surroundings:

*Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
Tht swell and flutter on this subject lute! (EH)*

The better part of the poem makes an instantaneous impact on the reader by its individual and emotional use of language:

*And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,*



*That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze
At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (EH)*

These lines express Coleridge's positive faith that God is present at the heart of all His creation. This intuition of life's ultimate wholeness and oneness, which is of absolute importance to our understanding of all Coleridge's poetry, is re-affirmed in the four magnificent lines that were later added to the poem:

*O! the one life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere. (EH)*

So, far from being a mere statement that life is a dynamic principle, the poetry embodies this principle in terms of metaphor and paradox, assisted by the rising rhythm, which gathers to triumphant emphasis on the major image.

The poem shows Coleridge's deep love for Nature and a close and minute observation of her different and changing phenomena. At the very beginning, the poet refers to the white-flowered jasmines and broad-leaved myrtles, which are growing all around the cottage where the poet is sitting with his beloved. The lovers are watching the clouds which, a little while ago, were radiant with sunlight, but which are now darkening. In the opposite direction the evening star is serenely and brilliantly shining. Thus, we see that the poem contains some very beautiful word-pictures of the scenes of nature.

The poet greatly enjoys the company of his beloved in this beautiful atmosphere and attractive surroundings. The poem also shows the poet's sensuous apprehension of the beauties of nature. The poet greatly enjoys the scents that are coming from the nearby bean-field. A little further in the poem there is another beautiful word-picture and can be seen in *The sunbeams dances, like diamonds, on the main.*

The poet also identifies the beauties of nature with human emotions. In the beginning of the poem, the poet says that white-flowered jasmines and broad-leaved myrtles are suitable symbols of Innocence and love. Then, seeing the serene and brilliant light of the evening star, the poet says that wisdom should also be similarly serene and brilliant. The poem is full of philosophical speculations of the poet. He meditates upon the nature of this universe and



concludes that there is only one life in the universe. It exists within us as well as outside of us. It is the essence of all motion in the universe. It illumines all sounds and gives the power of sounds to all light, which makes all thoughts rhythmical. It is the source of joy everywhere. The poet says that it is impossible for a man not to love all things in a world, which is so permeated by the Divine Spirit.

In another passage of the poem, the poet says that all the objects of this living universe may be regarded as organic Harps of different shapes and sizes. Just as at the touch of the breeze the strings of the harp come to life and produce sweet musical notes, in the same manner; all the objects of this universe are stimulated and inspired to thought when they are swept over by the molding and shaping spirit of God. Coleridge's views that the spirit of God pervades the whole universe, inspiring different objects to life and thought is a pantheistic view and is found in some other Romantic poet's like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats.

In the conclusion to the poem, Coleridge leaves aside his pantheistic views and expresses his conformity to Sara's views. When the poet was expressing his pantheistic views, he saw that the looks of his mistress darkened, and she showed disapproval of his views. She being a devout Christian cannot accept his non-Christian views. The poet has such a deep love for her that he cannot displease her, and leaving aside his philosophical views, he expresses his conformity to her traditional orthodox Christian views. He says that philosophical speculations have no worth or permanence. They cannot compare with the permanent and deep-rooted beliefs of religion. The nature of God is incomprehensible. Man should not try to understand Him. He should accept religious beliefs as they are without questioning them. The poet expresses his deep faith in God and His mercifulness. In the closing part of the poem, it becomes stilled in manner.

Indeed, it is one of perfect of his early poems but we see that all the similes are appropriate, sensuous, and appealing. The poem makes a great impact on the reader by its simple and direct language, the poet's sensuous enjoyment of nature, its beautiful and charming word-pictures, its music, and the poet is fleeing philosophical speculations and his intuitive realization of life's ultimate wholeness and oneness.

Abbreviation

The Eolian Harp- EH



References

1. Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1973.
2. Ashton, Rosemary. *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
3. Berkeley, Richard. *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason*. Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2007.
4. Holmes, Richard. *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804*. New York: Pantheon, 1989.
5. Martin, C. "Coleridge and Cudsworth: A Source for *The Eolian Harp*". *N & Q* 13 (1966), 173–176.
6. Mays, J. C. C. (editor). *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works I Vol I.I*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.