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The Influence Of The Upanishads On The Poetry And Thought Of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Abstract: This paper examines the direct and indirect influence of the Upaniṣads on the philosophical outlook and poetic imagination of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although Coleridge did not read Sanskrit texts in the original language, he lived in an intellectual climate where Indian philosophical ideas were increasingly available through translations, Orientalist scholarship, and comparative philosophy. The study argues that Coleridge's ideas of imagination, unity of existence, nature as a living presence, and inner knowledge reveal strong conceptual affinities with key Upaniṣadic doctrines such as the identity of Atman and Brahman, the primacy of inward realization, and the vision of an all-pervading spiritual reality. Through close readings of *The Eolian Harp*, *Frost at Midnight*, *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, and *Kubla Khan*, this paper demonstrates that Coleridge's poetry reflects a worldview strikingly aligned with Upaniṣadic metaphysics. Written in accessible language, the paper aims to introduce undergraduate students to cross-cultural philosophical influence within English Romantic poetry.

Key Words - Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Upaniṣads, Romanticism, Indian Philosophy, Imagination, Unity, Consciousness

Introduction

English Romantic poetry is traditionally studied within a largely European framework. Students are often taught to associate Romanticism with reactions against Enlightenment rationalism, the impact of the French Revolution, or the influence of German Idealist philosophy. While these intellectual currents are undeniably important, this approach can restrict our understanding of Romanticism as a global phenomenon. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also marked by increasing contact between Europe and Asia, especially India, through colonial administration, translation projects, and scholarly curiosity. This contact produced a flow of texts and ideas across continents, often through imperfect channels, but with real intellectual consequences.

During this period, ancient Indian philosophical texts such as the Upaniṣads began to circulate in Europe. Though initially mediated through complicated layers of translation and commentary, these texts introduced new ways of thinking about reality, consciousness, and the relationship between the self and the universe. For European thinkers dissatisfied with mechanical materialism and rigid theological systems, Indian philosophy offered alternative metaphysical models that emphasized unity, inward knowledge, and spiritual experience. Romanticism, at least in part, can be seen as a protest against a world that had reduced nature to matter and mind to mechanism. The Upaniṣadic worldview, by contrast, imagines a universe alive with spirit and a self that is more than social identity or sensory experience.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge occupies a unique position among the English Romantic poets because of his deep engagement with philosophy, theology, and metaphysics. He was not merely a poet of emotion or imagination but a serious thinker who sought a unified vision capable of reconciling mind and nature, reason and faith, and humanity and the divine. His lifelong intellectual struggle to overcome dualism and fragmentation places him in close philosophical proximity to the central concerns of the Upaniṣads. His poetry repeatedly returns to questions that are also central to Upaniṣadic inquiry: What is the relation between the human mind and the living world? Is there a unity behind the multiplicity of experience? Where does knowledge truly begin: in the senses, or in inward realization?

This paper explores how Upaniṣadic ideas influenced Coleridge's poetry and thought, not through direct textual borrowing but through conceptual affinity and intellectual transmission. Rather than claiming that Coleridge consciously adopted Indian philosophy, the paper argues that his poetic imagination developed within a cultural and philosophical environment where Upaniṣadic concepts were present and meaningful. Reading Coleridge alongside the Upaniṣads allows undergraduate students to view Romantic poetry as part of a wider human inquiry into self, reality, and knowledge, and it helps to challenge the assumption that English literature grows only from European roots.

The Upaniṣads and Their Arrival in European Thought

The Upaniṣads are ancient Indian philosophical texts forming the concluding portion of the Vedic corpus. Unlike earlier ritual-focused texts, the Upaniṣads concentrate on metaphysical questions concerning the nature of reality, the self, and ultimate knowledge. Their most significant teaching is the identity of Atman, the inner self, with Brahman, the universal and absolute reality. According to the Upaniṣads, liberation is achieved not through ritual or external authority but through inner realization and direct insight. The knowledge they value is not merely descriptive knowledge about the world but transformative knowledge that changes how one exists in the world.

By the late eighteenth century, these ideas began to reach Europe through translation and commentary. The most influential early translation was Anquetil-Duperron's Latin version of Persian renderings of the Upaniṣads, published as *Oupnek'hat*. Although linguistically flawed, this work sparked considerable interest among European philosophers, theologians, and writers. Indian metaphysics entered discussions alongside Greek philosophy, Christian mysticism, and German Idealism. Scholars such as Elinor Shaffer

have shown that Indian texts did not simply arrive as exotic curiosities but were taken up as serious resources in debates about religion, mind, and metaphysics (Shaffer 59–94). In other words, ideas associated with the Upaniṣads were part of the philosophical air of the age, even when encountered indirectly.

Coleridge lived during this expanding intellectual horizon. He was aware of non-Western systems of thought and often expressed dissatisfaction with narrow doctrinal Christianity and Enlightenment empiricism. Indian philosophy, with its emphasis on unity, inward knowledge, and spiritual immanence, offered ideas that resonated deeply with his own philosophical concerns. This historical context makes an examination of Upaniṣadic influence on Coleridge plausible and necessary, not because Coleridge must have copied Indian doctrine, but because his intellectual project moves in a similar direction and develops within an era already discussing Indian metaphysical models.

Coleridge as a Philosopher-Poet

Coleridge cannot be adequately understood as a poet alone. He regarded poetry as a mode of philosophical insight and believed that the highest truths could be expressed more fully through imagination than through abstract reasoning. In *Biographia Literaria* he develops a famous distinction between imagination and mere fancy, suggesting that imagination is a creative and unifying power rather than a playful faculty of decoration (Coleridge, *Biographia* 167–202). What matters for this paper is not the technical vocabulary, but the direction of his argument: Coleridge believes that reality is not best known by breaking it into parts; it is best approached through a faculty that can perceive unity in difference.

He strongly rejected the mechanistic worldview of Enlightenment science, which treated nature as inert matter governed by external laws. Instead, Coleridge viewed nature as alive, meaningful, and spiritually interconnected with the human mind. This organic vision aligns closely with the Upaniṣadic conception of a living, unified reality. John Muirhead's account of Coleridge as a philosopher emphasizes his constant effort to move beyond cold rationalism toward a more integrated understanding of mind and world (Muirhead 89–121). For Coleridge, the deepest truths do not come from detached observation alone, because detachment can produce a dead universe. Knowledge must involve a participation of the knower.

Coleridge's dissatisfaction with empiricism led him to formulate his theory of imagination, which he considered the supreme human faculty. Imagination, for Coleridge, was not mere fancy or illusion but a power that reveals unity within diversity. This understanding of knowledge through inward perception parallels the Upaniṣadic emphasis on inner realization rather than sensory accumulation. Eliot Deutsch, writing on Advaita, explains that non-dual philosophy is concerned with how consciousness discovers unity behind apparent multiplicity (Deutsch 48–72). Coleridge's project is not identical with Advaita, yet he is clearly drawn to an idea of unity that cannot be reduced to physical sameness. His unity is spiritual and experiential.

In this sense, Coleridge can be approached as a poet whose poems are also philosophical experiments. Each poem becomes a space where a certain model of reality is tested. Nature poems become metaphysical poems because nature is not merely scenery; it is a field of meaning.

The Eolian Harp and The Doctrine Of One Life

The Eolian Harp is among Coleridge's most philosophically revealing poems. The poem presents a moment of quiet contemplation in which nature, music, and thought merge into a single experience. The harp, played by the wind, becomes a central metaphor for a universe animated by one living force. Coleridge expresses this vision explicitly when he imagines all of animated nature as organic harps moved by one intellectual breeze (Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 96). The suggestion is that a single spiritual principle flows through all forms of life, producing diversity without destroying unity. This vision resembles the Upaniṣadic teaching that Brahman pervades all existence.

A key moment in the poem presents this intuition directly:

*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*
(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 96)

This passage makes three important claims. First, the poem imagines a life that is both within the human being and outside in the world. Second, it claims this life is the soul of motion itself, meaning that movement is not purely mechanical but somehow animated. Third, it claims that thought and joy are not merely private mental events but are connected to a universal rhythm. In simple terms, the poem moves toward a metaphysics of unity.

Here the Upaniṣadic parallel becomes visible. The Upaniṣads repeatedly suggest that the same reality exists within the individual self and within the cosmos. In many Upaniṣadic passages, knowledge means recognizing that what seems separate is truly one. Patrick Olivelle's translation presents this inward-turning movement as central to Upaniṣadic teaching, where realization is achieved not by outward conquest but by inward discovery (Olivelle 3–28). Coleridge's poem dramatizes a similar movement: the poet begins with a domestic scene, turns outward to the sky and evening star, then turns inward to thought, and finally reaches a sudden vision of one life.

At the same time, *The Eolian Harp* also stages an anxiety about this insight. The poem introduces Sara's serious eye as a mild reproof and returns to a more orthodox Christian posture (Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 97). This matters because it shows Coleridge's position is not simple rebellion. He is caught between a desire for unity and a fear of spiritual error. Yet even this tension can be compared to the Upaniṣads, which often present the highest knowledge as dangerous to the unprepared. In many traditions, profound

metaphysical insight demands humility. Coleridge's poem does not deny the vision; it frames it as a moment that must be handled with reverence.

In undergraduate terms, one can say this: Coleridge is attracted to a worldview where nature and mind are not separate. The Upaniṣads provide a philosophical language for such a worldview, even if Coleridge reaches it through his own path.

Frost at Midnight and Inner Realization

Frost at Midnight is a meditative poem that explores solitude, memory, and spiritual growth. The quiet setting allows Coleridge to reflect on his own childhood education and to imagine a different form of learning for his child. He contrasts the rigid, mechanical schooling of the city with a vision of education guided by nature and inward awareness. This is not merely sentimental; it is philosophical. Coleridge suggests that real learning is not the memorization of external material but the formation of the spirit.

The poem describes an atmosphere so quiet that it deepens reflection. The speaker's mind begins to interpret even a small film fluttering on the grate as if it were a companionable sign (Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 241). This shows a key Romantic move: the mind seeks meaning and relationship, even in what seems trivial. Yet Coleridge does not present this as pure projection. Instead, the mind and nature are shown as sympathetic. The world is not dead; it responds, even if subtly.

The most Upaniṣad-friendly moment is Coleridge's vision of nature as teacher:

*But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds
So shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language*

(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 243)

This passage presents nature as speaking an eternal language. It is not merely beautiful; it is intelligible. It has meaning, and it teaches. The Upaniṣads repeatedly treat nature not as a meaningless physical system but as a field in which the ultimate reality is present. Richard King explains that Indian philosophical traditions frequently treat knowledge as a mode of transformation of the knower rather than a neutral description of objects (King 41–66). Coleridge's educational vision aligns with this: the child will not simply know nature; nature will mould the child's spirit.

Coleridge goes further and describes the divine as teaching through all things:

*That eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself*

(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 243)

Here the claim is explicitly immanent: God teaches himself in all. This resembles the Upaniṣadic sense that Brahman is present in all things and that knowledge is realizing this presence. S. Radhakrishnan, discussing the Upaniṣads, notes the emphasis on an all-pervading reality that is not outside the world but within it (Radhakrishnan 132–176). Coleridge's lines do not use the Upaniṣadic vocabulary, yet they aim toward a similar philosophical structure: the divine is not distant, and learning is a process of awakening to that nearness.

For undergraduate students, the simplest way to state the connection is this: in *Frost at Midnight*, knowledge is inward, nature is meaningful, and the divine is present within the whole. These are also core Upaniṣadic directions.

This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison And Spiritual Unity

In *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, Coleridge explores unity beyond physical limitation. Confined due to injury, he imagines his friends walking through the countryside. Despite his physical absence, he experiences deep emotional and spiritual connection. The poem becomes a practical example of how consciousness can cross physical boundaries.

Early in the poem, the speaker expresses pain at being left behind. Yet the poem shifts as imagination becomes a bridge between self and world. The key turn occurs when the speaker suddenly feels joy as if present with his friends:

A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad

As I myself were there

(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 110)

This is more than empathy; it is an experience of shared being. The Upaniṣads insist that separateness is not final. At the deepest level, the self is not isolated. Philosophically, the claim is that unity is more real than separation. Coleridge's poem dramatizes this claim through a lived moment. The body is confined, but the mind is not. Imagination makes communion possible.

The poem also suggests that nature itself carries spiritual presence and can reveal the divine. Coleridge describes a moment of perception where the landscape seems less gross than bodily, as if it were veiling a larger spirit (Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 109). This resembles the Upaniṣadic sense that the visible world is not merely material but expressive of the ultimate reality. Dasgupta explains that early Indian philosophy often treats the world not as illusion in the casual sense, but as a manifestation whose true depth is grasped through knowledge (Dasgupta 27–68). Coleridge's language is not technical, but the movement is similar: the world becomes transparent to spirit.

Later, Coleridge states a moral insight that also fits Upaniṣadic ethics:

Henceforth I shall know

That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure

(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 111)

Nature becomes a companion to inner integrity. The Upaniṣads repeatedly link knowledge with ethical transformation. The wise person is not merely a thinker; the wise person becomes calm, clear, and compassionate. Coleridge's line suggests that purity and wisdom are conditions for deeper perception. The poem thus carries not only metaphysics but also a simple spiritual discipline: inner refinement enables one to experience unity.

Kubla Khan and Visionary Consciousness

Kubla Khan differs significantly from Coleridge's reflective nature poems. It presents a dream-like vision shaped by powerful imaginative forces. Creation in this poem arises not from conscious planning but from a deeper, almost mystical state of mind. For students, this poem can be read as an exploration of altered consciousness and visionary creativity.

The poem begins with a sacred river:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea

(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 282)

The river moves through depths beyond measurement. The imagery suggests layers of reality beneath ordinary perception. The Upaniṣads often describe knowledge as a journey inward into deeper levels of consciousness. They also speak of states beyond waking awareness, often suggesting that the surface mind does not see the whole truth. In a simplified comparison, *Kubla Khan* presents a mind that enters a visionary mode where reality appears as symbolic landscape.

The poem also stages a tension between beauty and terror. The deep romantic chasm is described as holy and enchanted, yet savage (Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 282). This is important because many spiritual traditions, including the Upaniṣadic tradition, treat the encounter with the absolute as both attractive and overwhelming. The sublime is not only comforting; it can also dissolve ordinary identity.

The poem's final section intensifies this theme by portraying the poet as a figure of sacred power:

Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair

Weave a circle round him thrice

And close your eyes with holy dread

(Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 283)

The imagery here suggests ritual reverence around the inspired figure. The poet becomes a channel for a force greater than himself. In Upaniṣadic terms, one might say the individual consciousness has touched a deeper source of reality. The poem ends with the claim that he has fed on honeydew and drunk the milk of Paradise, indicating a nourishment from a realm beyond ordinary life (Coleridge, *Complete Poems* 283). The philosophical point is that imagination is not merely personal invention; it is participation in something vast.

G. R. Thompson's discussion of Coleridge's imagination emphasizes its quasi-sacred character, where imaginative power is linked to spiritual perception rather than entertainment (Thompson 55–88). If we connect this to Upaniṣadic thought in a careful undergraduate manner, the conclusion is not that Coleridge repeats Upaniṣadic doctrine, but that his poem imagines a deeper reality accessible through altered states of mind, and the Upaniṣads offer one important philosophical tradition that values such inward depth.

Imagination and Atman

Coleridge's theory of imagination provides the strongest philosophical link with the Upaniṣads. In *Biographia Literaria*, he distinguishes imagination from fancy and suggests imagination is a unifying power that participates rather than merely copying it (Coleridge, *Biographia* 167–202). This matters because it shifts the role of the mind. The mind is not a passive mirror; it is a living power that helps reality become meaningful.

The Upaniṣadic concept of Atman refers to the inner self that is identical with Brahman. This self is not separate from the universe but its true essence. When one realizes Atman, one realizes the unity behind the world of differences. Coleridge's imagination performs a comparable function by revealing unity beneath diversity and by allowing the human mind to participate in the life of the whole. Deutsch's account of non-dual philosophy helps clarify this connection: non-duality is not simply an abstract statement; it is a change in how reality is experienced, where the boundaries between self and world are understood differently (Deutsch 48–72).

In Coleridge's poems, imagination repeatedly becomes the power that changes experience from mere observation into communion. In *The Eolian Harp*, it becomes the faculty through which one life is perceived. In *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, it becomes the faculty through which separation is overcome. In *Frost at Midnight*, it becomes the faculty through which nature becomes intelligible and spiritually educative. In *Kubla Khan*, it becomes the faculty through which visionary creation occurs. These are four different poetic contexts, but they all show one consistent philosophical movement: reality is unified, and the mind can awaken to that unity.

Limitations and Caution

It is essential to acknowledge that Coleridge did not study the Upaniṣads in Sanskrit. His exposure came through translations and secondary discussions. Therefore, claims of influence must remain cautious and

grounded in historical context. Yet influence does not require direct quotation or conscious imitation. Ideas circulate through cultural exchange, translation, and shared intellectual concerns. Shaffer's work on Romanticism and Indian thought emphasizes that the reception of Indian philosophy in Europe involved complex mediation rather than simple direct borrowing (Shaffer 59–94). That complexity does not remove influence; it simply requires careful wording.

A balanced undergraduate conclusion is that Coleridge's thought shows two things at once: first, a historical possibility of contact with Upaniṣadic ideas through the intellectual culture of his age; second, a strong conceptual affinity with Upaniṣadic metaphysics even when those ideas are not named. This is enough for a meaningful argument, especially in a graduate-level classroom where students learn to distinguish between direct textual dependence and broader intellectual influence.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry and philosophy reveal striking affinities with Upaniṣadic thought. Through *The Eolian Harp*, *Frost at Midnight*, *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, and *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge explores unity, imagination, inner knowledge, and spiritual presence in ways that closely resemble Indian philosophical ideas. The poems are not merely nature descriptions or personal memories; they are meditations on what reality is and how the mind belongs to it.

Reading Coleridge alongside the Upaniṣads enriches our understanding of Romantic poetry and challenges narrowly Eurocentric literary histories. For undergraduate students, this approach opens a broader view of literature as a global philosophical dialogue, where ideas about the self and the universe travel across languages and centuries, and where poetry becomes a meeting place of civilizations.

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