



# Imagining Sustainability: Ecological Ethics in the Romantic Imagination of Wordsworth and Coleridge

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**Abstract:** In a time increasingly shaped by environmental crisis, returning to Romantic poetry offers a different way of thinking about humanity's relationship with nature. This paper explores how imagination in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge can be understood as an ethical and ecological force. Rather than treating nature as a passive background, the poets present it as something active, which shapes the perception, emotion, and even moral awareness. Focusing on "Tintern Abbey," "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Kubla Khan," the analysis builds on ecocritical perspectives and selected contemporary ecological ideas. Wordsworth's poetry seems to suggest a more harmonious and reflective engagement with nature, while Coleridge's work reveals the consequences of imbalance and human excess. Taken together, these texts seem to point towards an early form of ecological thinking, one that does not only anticipate the modern term "sustainability," but engages with many of its central concerns. In this sense, Romantic Imagination can be read not merely as aesthetic expression, but as a means of rethinking human existence within the natural world.

**Key words:** Romantic Imagination, Ecocriticism, Sustainability, Wordsworth, Coleridge

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability is not only an environmental preservation but also an ethical and cultural framework that emphasizes ecological balance, interdependence, and long-term responsibility toward both human and non-human life. Contemporary sustainability theory calls for a shift away from exploitative attitudes toward a relational understanding of nature, where humans recognize their embeddedness within ecological systems. Although the term "sustainability" is modern, its fundamental principles can be traced back to Romantic literature. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, industrialization started transforming natural landscapes and human relationships with the environment. Romantic poets responded to these changes by reimagining nature as a source of moral insight, emotional restoration, and spiritual connection. This study takes an ecocritical approach to examine how imagination functions as a medium of ecological awareness in selected works of Wordsworth and Coleridge. It further integrates contemporary theoretical frameworks such as posthumanism, Anthropocene theory, and New Materialism to provide a more detailed interpretation of Romantic ecological thought. The selection of these four poems is not accidental. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" offer

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T. Islam et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Challenges and Trends in Arts and Social Sciences (ICCTASS 2025)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1019,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-581-2\\_8](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-581-2_8)

a more reflective and harmonious engagement with nature, where memory, perception, and moral growth seem closely connected. In contrast, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" moves in a different direction, presenting more complex and sometimes unsettling ecological visions that revolve around transgression, imbalance, and the limits of human control. Taken together, these texts make it possible to explore Romantic ecological imagination across a wider range from harmony to crisis. Although earlier studies have often focused on Romantic representations of nature, this paper takes a slightly different approach by placing Romantic imagination in conversation with contemporary sustainability theory. In doing so, it aims to offer a more grounded and comparative understanding of ecological ethics in Romantic poetry.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper shows an ecocritical methodology combined with close textual analysis. Ecocriticism is operationalized by examining how nature is represented as an active and ethically significant presence rather than a passive backdrop. The research focuses on three key dimensions:

1. The representation of human and nature relationships, particularly the tension between harmony and domination
2. The role of imagination in shaping ecological perception and ethical awareness
3. The moral consequences of ecological disruption

Through close reading of imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure, the study connects literary analysis with broader ecological and ethical concerns.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Ecocriticism and Romanticism**

Ecocriticism is generally concerned with how literature engages with the natural world and how such representations shape human attitudes toward the environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty defines it, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii), a definition that highlights both its literary and ethical dimensions. Building on this, Lawrence Buell (1995) suggests that environmentally oriented texts tend to treat the non-human world as more than a passive background, instead of an active and meaningful presence. In this sense, the romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge appears to stand in stark contrast, as the natural world in their texts is anything but passive. Within this framework, Romantic poetry seems especially significant, as, emerging at a time of rapid industrial change, it often reflects a growing concern regarding humanity's relationship to nature. As Jonathan Bate (1991) argues, Romantic writers did not simply describe nature but sought to reimagine it as a source of moral insight and ecological awareness. In this sense, Romantic poetry can be read as foregrounding emotional, spiritual, and ethical modes of engaging with the natural world which makes it particularly relevant to ecocritical inquiry.

### 3.2 Contemporary Ecological Theories

Recent theoretical developments have further expanded the scope of ecocritical analysis and offers new ways to rethink the relationship between humans and the natural world. For instance, Posthumanism questions the long-standing assumption of human superiority and instead situates the human within a broader network of relations. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) argues, subjectivity is not autonomous but relational, shaped through continuous interaction with both human and non-human forces. This conception of subjectivity situates humans not as separate from the rest of nature, secluded in their own world, but as an integral part of it. By reading in this light, Romantic ideas of unity between mind and nature begin to take on new interpretations which suggest that poets such as Wordsworth were already challenging anthropocentric ways of thinking. Similarly, Anthropocene theory provides a framework for understanding the present as a geological epoch in which human activity has become a dominant force shaping the planet. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) notes that the distinction between natural history and human history has become increasingly blurred in this context. Although the term itself is modern, Romantic texts can be read as early reflections on environmental disruption, particularly in their response to industrialization and changing landscapes. New Materialism further complicates human-nature allocation by emphasizing the vitality and agency of non-human matter. Jane Bennett (2010) suggests that matter is not inert but “vibrant,” capable of influencing events and interactions in meaningful ways. This perspective encourages a reading of literary texts in which natural elements, whether landscapes, animals, or objects can participate actively in shaping human experience and ethical awareness. In addition, Ecofeminism draws attention to the interconnected systems of domination that affect both nature and marginalized groups. Ecofeminist thought critiques hierarchical structures that position both women and the environment as objects of control and exploitation (Shiva, 1988; Gaard, 2011). In this research, this perspective is applied selectively to “Kubla Khan”, where the tension between imposed order and untamed nature can be read as reflecting broader dynamics of power, control, and resistance.

### 4. Wordsworth: Harmony and Sustainable Imagination

Wordsworth’s poetry often presents nature not simply as a source of beauty, but as something that gradually shapes emotional and ethical stability. In “Tintern Abbey”, nature is not merely observed from a distance; rather, it is experienced as a living presence that continues to influence thought and feeling over time. The speaker’s return to the landscape suggests that nature’s significance lies as much in memory and reflection as in immediate perception. From a posthumanist perspective, Wordsworth’s idea of “a motion and a spirit” can be read as challenging the assumption that humans stand apart from the natural world. Instead, it seems to suggest a form of interconnected existence in which human consciousness is deeply entangled with the surrounding environment (Braidotti, 2013). In this sense, Wordsworth’s vision begins to move beyond anthropocentric thinking and starts opening up a more relational understanding of ecological experience. At the same time,

Wordsworth's treatment of nature connects with New Materialist ideas that emphasize the active role of the non-human world. As Jane Bennett (2010) argues, matter itself can be understood as "vibrant," possessing a kind of agency that shapes human experience. By reading in this light, nature in Wordsworth's poetry participates in the formation of emotional and moral awareness. His emphasis on memory and reflection further suggests that sustainable relationships with nature are not immediate or automatic, but are cultivated gradually through continued engagement and attentiveness. In "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Wordsworth portrays the loss and partial recovery of ecological perception. While childhood offers an intuitive connection to nature, adulthood requires conscious reflection to maintain this awareness. This reflects a mature form of sustainability that is grounded in responsibility rather than innocence.

## **5. Coleridge: Crisis, Power, and Ecological Warning**

### **5.1 "The Rime of the ancient Mariner"**

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge presents a noticeably darker and more unsettling ecological vision. The Mariner's killing of the albatross is not just an isolated act of violence but it can be read as a disruption of a delicate natural order that immediately gives way to suffering, decay, and spiritual unrest. What is striking here is how quickly the balance between human action and the natural world collapses. From a New Materialist perspective, the albatross may be understood as more than a symbolic figure. Rather than functioning only as a metaphor, it appears to operate as an active presence within a larger ecological system. As Jane Bennett (2010) argues, non-human entities possess a certain vitality that allows them to influence events and relationships. In this light, the death of the albatross sets off a chain of material and spiritual consequences that establish the idea that human and non-human life are deeply interconnected. The poem can also be read in relation to Anthropocene concerns, particularly in its portrayal of unintended ecological consequences. The Mariner's impulsive act, without clear justification, begins to answer the kinds of human interventions that disrupt natural systems on a larger scale. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) suggests, the Anthropocene marks a moment when human actions begin to have planetary effects. Although Coleridge writes long before this concept emerged, the poem seems to anticipate such anxieties by showing how ecological imbalance can lead to physical sufferings and existential crisis. In this sense, the Mariner's eventual realization does not come through rational understanding alone, but through a gradual understanding of the value of non-human life. This shift suggests that ecological awareness is inseparable from ethical transformation in Coleridge's vision.

### **5.2 "Kubla Khan": Power and Ecological Domination**

"Kubla Khan" presents a more suspicious and layered ecological vision that moves between creativity and control. At the center of the poem lies the construction of the "pleasure-dome," an image that can be read as an attempt to impose order on a landscape that is otherwise fluid, unpredictable, and alive. Rather than simply celebrating artistic

imagination, the poem seems to raise questions about the limits of human power when confronted with the force of the natural world. From an ecofeminist perspective, this act of construction begins to reflect broader dynamics of domination and control over nature. Ecofeminist thinkers argued that systems which seek to dominate nature often mirror hierarchical structures that marginalize and exploit the “other,” whether human or non-human (Shiva, 1988; Gaard, 2011). Therefore, Kubla’s attempt to shape the landscape into a “stately pleasure-dome” can be understood as an assertion of authority over a space that resists complete control. Another striking point is that the natural environment in the poem does not fully submit to this imposed order. The landscape is described as “savage,” “holy,” and “enchanted,” which suggests a kind of vitality that exceeds human design. This tension between structure and wildness creates a sense of instability, as if the natural world is constantly pushing back against attempts to contain it. However, “Kubla Khan” does not offer a simple opposition between nature and culture, but instead reveals the tenderness of human efforts to dominate ecological systems. The poem seems to suggest that such attempts remain incomplete and potentially disruptive. From this perspective, Coleridge’s vision can be read as a subtle critique of authority and control that aligns with ecofeminist concerns about hierarchy, imbalance, and ecological disruption.

## **6. Comparative Analysis**

When considered together, Wordsworth and Coleridge begin to offer two distinct but interconnected ways of imagining the relationship between humans and the natural world. Wordsworth’s poetry tends to move toward harmony, where nature is experienced as a source of emotional balance and ethical insight. He emphasizes memory, reflection, and quiet perceptions that ecological awareness develops gradually, through sustained engagement with the environment. In this sense, his work connects with posthumanist ideas of interconnected existence and with New Materialist notions of nature as an active, shaping presence. However, Coleridge approaches the same relationship from a more unsettled angle. His poetry often foregrounds disruption, excess, and the consequences of human action. In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, a single impulsive act leads to far-reaching ecological and moral consequences, while “Kubla Khan” explores the tension between creative ambition and the limits of control.

What emerges from this comparison is not a simple opposition, but a better understanding of Romantic ecological imagination. Wordsworth focuses on why a harmonious relationship with nature matters, while Coleridge shows what happens when that relationship breaks down. Taken together, their works move between care and caution and two complementary perspectives that remain relevant to contemporary discussions of sustainability.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that Romantic imagination can be seen as more than a literary or aesthetic concern, as it also leads to important ecological and ethical questions. Through the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, it becomes possible to see how early nineteenth-century poetry engages with questions that continue to shape environmental thought today. Wordsworth's emphasis on emotional connection and reflective awareness points toward a model of ecological harmony, while Coleridge's darker, more fragmented visions highlight the consequences of imbalance and human excess. By bringing these texts into conversation with contemporary theoretical perspectives, this paper suggests that Romantic literature can still offer meaningful insights into modern sustainability debates. At the same time, it seems important to recognize that Romantic poetry does not provide simple solutions. Instead, it opens up a space for reflections that encourages readers to reconsider how they relate to the natural world. In this sense, returning to Romantic texts is not only an academic exercise but it is a way of thinking more carefully about ecological responsibilities in the present. Then, their relevance lies not just in what they say about nature, but in how they invite us to see it differently.

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