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## ENG 200: The Consciousness of Reality through Poetry

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Dr. Kim

English 200

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### The Consciousness of Reality through Poetry

Reality is the state in which things exist independently rather than in imagination, but it is so broadly defined therefore the line between fact and fiction is blurred. Along with the vastness of its conception, reality is also unique to its beholder, like beauty or perception. One person's actuality differs from his or her neighbor's; furthermore, a person spends his or her life living in his or her own world. Worlds can be described in many diverse ways, but none are more successful than poetry. Poetry pushes the boundaries of language by painting pictures, evoking emotion, and increasing the understanding of collaborative universes. Especially with Romantic influence, poetry is redefined as a means of connection in a complex world. One technique exercised by Romantic poets is the application of a double consciousness to add depth of character and complexity to his or her work. In the poems, "This Living Hand" by John Keats, "Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and "Persimmons" by Li-Young Lee, double consciousness works through *prolepsis* (anticipation) and *anamnesis* (reflection) to simulate the genuine reality of the world and operate a Romantic literary dynamic that goes beyond mere realism.

Outlining the two stages of consciousness by appearing alive and deceased "This Living Hand" by John Keats distorts a chronological vortex to convey an authentic state of mind. The narrative of a man on his deathbed terrified of being forgotten, "This Living Hand" begins in the present tense, but prolepsis creates a poetic scope. For example Keats says, "This living hand,

now warm and capable/ Of earnest grasping, *would*, if it were cold...” (588). Without the word *would*, the poem would remain in present tense; however, its presence thrusts it to the future, a reality that doesn't yet exist. Keats later says, “So In my veins red life *might* stream again,/ And thou be conscience-calmed” (588). Here Keats envisions *proleptically* a future moment when he is deceased by saying that life *might* flow again. This double personage illustrates the cohabitation of separate people, or one person residing in different times. The reality on Keats' deathbed is written as both reflective and anticipatory by implying that in death he will haunt so he is not forgotten. Keats describes an uncanny encounter of a relic, a souvenir, or part of his body, “this living hand” which stages his future anticipation tracing forward in time. This “strange” time effect reveals the complexity of life itself, because his thoughts consider both his previous existence and future nonexistence. In this way, Keats aimed to set his Romantic masterpiece in motion through his theory of negative capability. “When man is capable of being in uncertainties...without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, Par. 6). Representing his experience as one of confusion and inner turmoil, Keats proves negative capability as actuality. Nevertheless, the double motion of *prolepsis*, anticipation, and *anamnesis*, recollection virtuously reveals the unavoidable negative capability of life.

Contrary to Keats' clear perception of his reality, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's “Kubla Khan” is arguably oblivious to the reader and the author. Upon waking up from an opium induced hallucination of Xanadu: Mongol ruler Kubla Khan's legendary capital city, Coleridge writes most of the poem. After becoming distracted, he forgets the rest. To disclose this, the poem opens with “Or in a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment” (486). Coleridge's work commences with an explanation that the prose is possibly true. By associating the story with a dreamlike

state, the speaker immediately outlines an alternate reality. The vision is later proven to be authentic when he says:

In a vision once I saw:  
 It was an Abyssian maid,  
 And on her dulcimer she played, Singing of Mount Abora,  
 Could I revive within me  
 Her symphony and song— (38-43, 487).

Coleridge establishes *anamnesis* and *prolepsis* in the first line by propelling himself from past to present tense so he may look back on his vision. He asks, “Could I revive within me/ Her symphony and song” (42-43, 487), where the Abyssian maid becomes the manifestation of his forgotten dream, as he longs to revive the magnificent fantasy. The narrator becomes the victim of a distinctly human characteristic: memory. Unlike other writers, Coleridge chooses to display his poetic abilities as flawed by prolepsis and anamnesis to highlight the imperfection of self. This application of double consciousness becomes a remarkable step in the sequence of Romantic poetry, because it animates the story in a literal way, as opposed to the idealism of false consciousness.

Coleridge’s use of the two forces not only outlines the disparity of reality, but also the coalescence of opposites. He states in essays in “The Theory of Life”:  
 “It is sufficient in that philosophically we under- /  
 stand that in all imitation two elements must coexist, /  
 and in all genuine creations of /  
 art there must be a union of these disparates—” (Coleridge 45).

Coleridge's theory of coalescence is evident in "Sonnet: To the River Otter" as he reminisces by the brook. One of the reflections describes, "What happy and what mournful hours, since last/ I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast," (lines 3-4). This quote is in essence anamnestic, but introduces Coleridge's theory of coalescence. By referring to the hours spent as both *happy* and *mournful*, the author fuses opposite forces of nature by projection into the present and recalling the past. The union, or coalescence of such forces literarily, as Coleridge argues, exemplifies the actual state of nature by contradictory movement of prolepsis and anamnesis.

Double movement of consciousness in the nature of life originated in Romantic era poetry, but its revolutionary effects are reverberated throughout centuries. One example is in "Persimmons" by Li-Young Lee. In the poem, the man of Chinese origin personifies himself and his existence by the flow of thoughts. To craft motion between consciousnesses, Li-Young Lee switches tenses every other stanza. For example, Lee states, "In sixth grade Mrs. Walker/ slapped the back of my head..." and later, "Donna undresses, her stomach is white" (1243). With only one stanza between these excerpts, there is a shift from a youthful state to a mature one. In the first quote and other past tense stanzas, Lee uses *anamnesis* to recall struggling to learn in the American school system; consequently, the author manipulates *prolepsis* to properly convey integration into the American culture. The author's sense of transculturalization is expressed later in the same stanza when it says, "I teach her [Donna] Chinese./ Crickets: *chiu chiu*. Dew: I've forgotten" (1244). Forgetting simple Chinese words, Lee describes his immigration to America as a complete transformation from one person to another; therefore, double consciousness is established via separate people in separate times. He cannot fully forget his Chinese heritage saying, "*Some things never leave a person:/ scent of the hair of one you love,/*

*the texture of persimmons, / in your palm, the ripe weight*" (1245). The persimmons, a reminder of China, is not forgotten and he lives as a person of two identities. Although this poem was not written in the Romantic era, the feature of the double consciousness has distinct similarities to Keats. Purposefully, "Persimmons" refutes the idea that reality consists of one unwavering personage, and expresses the authenticity of life as the joining of many confusing aspects.

Reality, referred to in the poems, "This Living Hand" by John Keats, "Kubla Khan"/"Sonnet: To the River Otter" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and "Persimmons" by Li-Young Lee is complicated and it is not easily understood. Poetry's precise and expressive nature allow poets to recall their own experiences and construct a reality so the reader forms different perceptions. Explaining one's actual state of living or perception by way of *prolepsis* and *anamnesis* successfully conveys the tendencies of life. Poetry's ability to capture internal and external forces of double consciousness' permits, in Shakespeare's words, "the marriage of true minds" (line 1); thus, many theories formed as to *why* the coexistence of opposites is so applicable. For example, the theory of negative capability by Keats, or coalescence by Coleridge work to explain the instinct of two-ness. The result, in Romantic poetry, is a poem written in the past, but is universally functional. Romantic poetry unionizes double consciousness and communicates the two spheres of reality to redefine idealism and shift the realm of truth to individuality.

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