

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Treatment of Nature and Supernatural in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

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Abstract

Coleridge, in his poems, has successfully presented to his readers a "nature and supernatural" blend that is considered very amazing. Coleridge perceives nature as something that surrounds the man and considers it a privilege to interpret it. "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" is although composed in the romantic tradition, contains a high imagination of the poet and covers supernatural elements for which it is regarded as a masterpiece of supernatural poetry. At the same time, it contains moral lessons for its readers; that whether big or small, no crime can go unpunished. The paper analyzes Coleridge's treatment of Nature and Supernatural in this poem.

Keywords: Ancient Mariner, redemption, Coleridge, Supernaturalism, Poetry of redemption

Introduction:

Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" was the first poem that inspired British explorers about Polar Regions. It combines nature and supernatural imagery in a "complex apologue of redemption" which fascinates even the readers of today (Wikipedia Editorial Team, 2017). It has inspired English by giving it the metaphor "albatross around one's neck,"¹ the quote "water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink"² and the phrase "a sadder but wiser man"³ (Wilkinson, 2002). It is an imaginary travelogue about a mariner sailing from his native town to Polar Regions. Initially, everything is quite fine. However, after crossing the equator strong winds force the ship towards the south and ultimately ship traps in an iceberg in Antarctica. Meanwhile, an Albatross appears and sailors feed and treat it well making it a good omen as the ice breaks and the ship makes her way out. However, one day the Ancient Mariner impulsively shoots the Albatross dead. It brings the bad weather back as the breeze stops to blow, the sun becomes bloody red, and all the crew feels thirst but find no potable water around. They blame Mariner for all the ill suffering and hang the Albatross around Mariner's neck (Coleridge, 1834).

All of a sudden, the Mariner sees a ship approaching from the west. It appears to be a ghost ship manned by two spirits the "Death" and "Life-in-Death," Death referring to its real meaning while Life-in-Death representing hardships and suffering of life. The two spirits are playing dice on Mariner's ship's crew's fate. Death wins the sailors and Life-in-Death wins the Ancient Mariner so all sailors die but the mariner lives on, trouble with seeing the curse in corpses' eyes with their

¹Means "Heavy responsibility"

² Means that despite being surrounded by resources someone is unable to use.

³The wedding Guest becomes sadder over the story but at the same time he is wiser than before as he learns a lesson from the story also.

last expressions fixed on their faces. This continues for seven days and nights and the Mariner feels complete loneliness (ibid).

His sufferings continue until he sees water snakes in the water and blesses them unaware. As a result of this praise and appreciation to God's creatures, and his sufferings end. The Albatross falls off of his neck into the sea and his guilt partially atones. Good fortune returns to him as the winds start blowing and the ship starts making way. The sailors who are dead rise again and start steering the ship towards home but it sinks in the whirlpool. All the sailors drown with the ship while the Mariner is saved by a hermit, a pilot and a pilot boy of a boat.

For the rest of his life, the Mariner is doomed to wander as a result and penance for shooting the Albatross. He is only relieved when he tells his story and teaches a lesson to different people around (ibid.).

Coleridge's on Nature in the "Rime of Ancient Mariner":

What constitutes the crux of poetry may not be answered with ultimate satisfaction. One feature that seems to emerge frequently through time is the concept of imagination and the term 'poetic imagination' to illustrate the emotional, imaginative, intellectual and expressive language used to reflect the writer's cognizance. Imagination is a mental faculty of framing images of external objects which are not perceived by five senses. It is realizing and integrating with intensity and ordering these things. Coleridge goes beyond the conventional concerns with imagination and considers it to be the only mediator and essential for creativity and aesthetics. He has tried to explain and analyze the Nature and its relationship with memory logically in this poem. He defines imagination (Coleridge, 1817) either to be primary or secondary. Primary imagination according to Coleridge is "living power and prime agent of all human Perception" ("Notes on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Biographia Literaria", n.d.) and the secondary imagination is "an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation" (ibid.). The secondary Imagination dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, with the purpose to be re-created. This imagination, when this process of dissolve, diffuse dissipate and recreation is rendered impossible, struggles "to idealize and to unify." It is very vital and because all of the objects are fixed and dead (ibid).

Readers can deduce from Coleridge's views about nature that there are two worlds for this romantic poet: Firstly the matters of Nature observable by average people and the poet himself before the rise of his imagination. Another Nature lies above when the poet's imagination elevates him to see Nature's spirit. Imagination plays its part to shape the worlds to be presented for readers. For example, the "water-snakes" in the poem are elevated from being biological creatures to being symbols of beauty and imagination. The same is true about the spiritual world of the beautiful, which becomes tangible through the "water-snakes." The poet's creativity exposes Nature's spirit, which embodies beauty, and thus the two worlds of the objective and the subjective amalgamate. However, Nature's spirit is revealed to a person endowed with imagination, while it remains inert and without beauty for someone who sees only its crust (ibid.).

Coleridge's relationship with Nature nurtured owing to his enduring sense of imagination (Aledelis, 2016). By nature, he means the wide world of eye and ear that surrounds man, the kinship of which to man has been the poet's privilege to interpret. However, as each poet sees through different glasses, Nature is interpreted differently:

"We receive but what we give,/And in our life alone does nature live" (Coleridge, 1802).

The relationship between Coleridge and Nature plays an important role in “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” His views about the poet’s creativity and its relation to Nature are profound because he appears to be both a poet and a philosopher in this poem (Ernest, 1907). It is evident that Coleridge regards nature as a loyal and everlasting friend whose love is pure and eternal, “love of nature is ever returned double.”

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a tale of crime, retribution, and reconciliation, since the Mariner suffers for his irrational, unprovoked and impulsive killing of the Albatross. The Mariner and the crewmates face havoc mentally, psychologically, and physically and this is a revenge of Nature inflicted due to the death of the Albatross. Sailors’ punishment is extensive even before their death as they become frantic because of thirst and face the torment of seeing water but being unable to drink it. The crew suffers from the Mariner despite being innocent. There are two ways to interpret their suffering. Firstly, retribution is blind; inspired by indignation and the desire to punish others. Secondly, sailors are deemed to be accomplices in the Mariner’s crime. However, their punishment is for once in the form of death but the eternal punishment in the form of Life-in-Death is destined for the Mariner. In retribution, it forces the Mariner to endure eternal torment. The Mariner speaks from the grave without dying and the purpose is to caution others about the harsh and lasting consequences of disrespect of the natural world and the results of dealing with Nature foolishly and carelessly (Mutasem & Al-Khader, 2016).

Coleridge on Supernaturalism in the “Rime of Ancient Mariner”:

Coleridge is considered the greatest poet of the supernatural in English literature for invaluable assets of supernatural elements in his poems. This poem makes him immortal gifted with the most fertile and spirited imagination among all the Romantic Poets. He creates perplexing mystery which according to Longinus⁴ makes a great writer as he can transport his reader to the imaginative world created by him. Coleridge, in this poem, not only creates an imaginary world but changes it into imaginative and then transforms it to a make-belief condition. His profound imagination establishes mature associations with the supernatural which also has a moral lesson for his readers. He manifests that any crime, big or small cannot go unpunished and suffering is the only way to transform a bad habit into a good one as it brings wisdom. In the “Rime of Ancient Mariner,” this excruciating medicine seems to be in action to make the Mariner realize that all of nature’s creations are worth loving and respectful. The poem also shows that the supernatural comes into existence when natural assets vanish. Fate is driven by the supernatural elements then as dearth and scarcity of water and other natural assets like wind contain plentiful suffering. With penance and true love, the suffering soul may be purified and regenerated. Coleridge successfully evokes the mystery of things in a way that they seem actual. At the same time, these lifeless objects become widespread and obsessive. He is in this way better than Wordsworth because he knows artfully how to handle those supernatural species which have psychological essence, or spirit. Supernatural elements in the poem “The Ancient Mariner” are based on hallucination which is nothing else but an outcome of remorse. In this poem, Coleridge’s skillfully deals with the supernatural in a two-fold way: initially, he makes supernatural appear to be natural in all respect and then he employs those methods which are suggestive, psychological, and also sophisticated so that the feelings of mystery can be produced and at the same time horror is experienced by the reader. He is not crude and sensational like other writers i.e. Horace, Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, and Monk Lewis. The supernatural by Coleridge has been made something that looks believable and

⁴ the great Greek critic

convincing and this is the real greatness of the poem "The Ancient Mariner." Although few are the impossible and incredible, fantasy-like situations present in the poem, e.g. the mesmerizing and magnetic power which lies in the ancient mariner's gaze or the appearance of the mysterious skeleton ship which is sudden and out of nowhere. Likewise, the specter woman with her mate, the dead crew coming back to life, the seraph-band which is signaling to the land, the sudden sinking of the ship, and the polar spirit commenting on or influencing the course of events are incredible. Still, these supernatural phenomena are believable because Coleridge has skillfully blended them with natural phenomena which are perfectly believable, and thus the whole story looks nothing but real.

The realistic effect given to the supernatural elements, earns great achievements making the poem not only cogent and thrilling but also a criticism of life. There are a large number of scenes and episodes in *The Ancient Mariner*, which fill readers either with a sense of mystery or a feeling of awfulness or with both. The first situation that strikes terror is the appearance of the skeleton-ship. The description of the ship torments with its "ribs" and its "cobweb-like sails." This ship sails without wind and tide, while the Mariner's ship stands still "like a painted ship upon a painted ocean". Obviously it is a supernatural force, which drives the ship while the crew also consists of supernatural ghostly characters. The feeling of agony is heightened when the crew of specter ship, comprising of Death and Life-in-Death is described. Coleridge creates a sense of horror in this poem not by having a direct and simple description but by using allusive and psychological methods. For instance, he does not portray the physical features of the ghost woman and her death mate, but he simply describes the effect of those external things on the mariner's mind. The appearance of Life-in-Death is described in the following three lines:

"Her lips were red, her looks were free,/Her locks were yellow as gold/Her skin was as white as leprosy (190-92)."

Next two lines follow as:

"The night-mare Life-in-Death was she,/ Who thickens man's blood with cold (lines 193-94)."

Coleridge thus conveys the horror and describes the supernatural in a few words only that the sight of ghost-woman would have a freezing effect on a man's blood. In other words, he leaves it to readers to imagine them for the grisly appearance of Life-in-Death that personifies the unspeakable anguish of a man who cannot die. The ghost ship, contrary to the natural world, sails without wind, and its inhabitants are spirits. Death and Life-in-Death are allegorical figures who become frighteningly real for the sailors, especially the Mariner, whose soul Life-in-Death "wins", thereby dooming him to a fate worse than death. Even the dead sailors seem freer than the Mariner because their souls are no more captured in bodies but the Mariner's destiny is to remain trapped indefinitely i.e. a living hell.

Similarly, in the latter part of the poem as a result of praising the sea creature, the Albatross falls off from around the Mariner's neck and his suffering begins to relieve. Angels appear over the sailors' corpses. They do not talk to the Mariner, but only take the oars and row his ship. The groaning, stirring, and coming back to the life of the dead crew must have been a terrifying experience for the Mariner:

"The dead men gave groan,/They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,/Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;/They raised their limbs like lifeless tools/We were a ghastly crew."

If a dead man in real life opens his eyes all of a sudden, the mourners would get horribly frightened and run away frantically. Here two hundred corpses got up on their feet and started working at the oars. The horror of the situation can well be imagined. In all these instances, it is

unclear whether the spirits are real or fabrications of the poet's imagination concluding that the supernatural treatment is left to the readers' imagination, not restricted to the poet's only

Conclusion:

The viewpoint that emerges from Coleridge's poems of the individual-nature relationship is suggestive of three stages. In the first stage, the individual passively perceives his natural surroundings with his senses. In the second stage, the individual ascends from mere sense perception of the outward forms of nature to spiritual unity with her essence or spirit. At this stage, individual-nature attain harmony and continuously acting and reacting upon each other and asserting unifying power upon each other. The third stage, above these two, where the individual asserts the unifying power of his imagination over nature and recreates her. The product of the third stage is generally poetry.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a journey of an individual's relationship with nature; a journey which the individual begins in ignorance of the one life of nature, and ends with awareness:

"He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small (lines 614-5)."

The Mariner, at first, perceives nature only with his senses. His perception of nature is so derogatory as to kill an innocent Albatross guiding the ship. This causes a complete separation between him and nature, and the poem exhibits the turmoil and misery of the world for an individual who is not in harmony with nature. In the center of this chaos and anarchy, the Mariner learns to commiserate with nature, consequently, he is able to see the spirit and beauty in nature and blesses her. Hence, he ascends to the second stage of the relationship. After returning from his voyage, the Mariner travels and preaches his story to other individuals, and his creation of the story takes him to the third stage of the individual-nature relationship.

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