

Narratology in S.T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Shubbar Abdul Adil Mousa
University of Kufa
College of Arts

I. i Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) is a poet, critic, and philosopher, who is one of the leaders of the English romantic movement. He is known for his theory of imagination. He believes that the poet has an important role in life, that he can be a teacher or a preacher to help the people realize the real message of man in this world and how man should be immunized by faith.

In poetry his reputation stands on a small group of poems and on his "masterpiece of imagination, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, if he had left us nothing else, this poem alone would fix his stature as a great poet."¹

Poetry and religion have similar points according to Coleridge, who believes that they show man the inner reality of life observing the moral values of the human beings. However this paper tries to examine in his poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, showing Coleridge's treatment of narratology, and how he focuses on sin, punishment and atonement construing his religious realization of man's role in life.

I. ii Coleridge and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Narration is an important facet of human nature. Man overcomes oblivion of wide experiences through molding values and sensations into an interesting body of work like the story, to sustain the continuity of the human heritage.

Coleridge is known for his persuasive style that overwhelms the reader's imagination with versatile images from various spans of time, that he follows peculiar techniques to draw and hold the reader within the world of his poem. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is of Coleridge's early poems that are presented in collaboration with William Wordsworth in "the **Lyrical Ballads** which is published in 1798."² Coleridge advocates the theory of organic unity of poetry, thus "a poem is to be judged not as a mirror of truth but as a thing in itself, almost as a living organism, which can not be measured by extrinsic standards, but only by its own internal consistency."³

Coleridge had the "erudition of, wide reading in philosophies and critical discipline learned in a strict school and based on a classical precedent."⁴ The poet uses the archetypal pattern in composing this poem to invoke the early experiences of life providing an emotional significance far beyond the reader's mind. So this technique goes beyond the definite meaning conveyed by the poem, that he attributes to the "stirring in the reader's mind, within or beneath his conscious response, of unconscious forces which have happened not to the individuals but to his ancestors, and of which the results are inherited in the structure of the brain."⁵

The poet uses the story that has taken the common shape in the fantasy of the community. So this poem is similar, to a certain extent, to the story of Able and Cain. Or, as the poet himself mentions, it is related to one of the stories of the **Arabian Nights**:

It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! A genie starts up, says he must kill the aforesaid because of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son.⁶

Consequently the merchant tells different stories to the genie to redeem himself of this mortal punishment.

Coleridge has contributed his utmost to impart this poem with ethical lessons to manifest his ethical and religious beliefs, giving his poem extra dimensions which will make the reader think of the internal and the external meanings of the poem. Thus, he believes that poetry is like religion in its purpose saying:

Both poetry and religion throw the object of deepest interest to a distance from us, and thereby not only aid our imagination, but in a most important manner subserve the interest of our virtues; for that man is indeed a slave, who is a slave to his own senses, and whose mind and imagination cannot carry him beyond the distance which his hand can catch, or even his eyes can reach.⁷

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is one of the most important Lyrical Ballads composed by Coleridge reflecting his extreme ability and profound meditation upon life experiences driven by his inner faculties of imagination. A ballad is "a short narrative poem originally designated to be sung or recited and might be accompanied by a dance."⁸ Like the epic, the ballad flourished in the illiterate or semi illiterate society because it depended on hearing not on writing.⁹ The traditional or folk ballad was oral but the literary one was written by a known poet in a method similar to the folk ballad.¹⁰

Coleridge uses the actants in his narrative poem. Like other narrators, he applies binary opposition: subject/object, sender / receiver, helper / opponent. So, he used character as an individualized manifestation of one or more actants; but an actant may be realized in a non-human creature just like the albatross, or the slimy creature of the sea.

The poem is essentially a narrative one, and describes a meeting between the title character and a guest at a wedding. The Wedding Guest expects to hear an amusing anecdote from the Mariner, but finds himself listening to the story of a horrific supernatural ordeal. The Mariner tells how his rash act of killing an albatross brings ghostly punishment upon the crew of his ship. The dead bird is hung around his neck to indicate his cursed status, making out of the mariner both a sinner and a Christ-like saviour. The ship is adrift in a stagnant sea alive with "slimy things". Dying of thirst, the men are visited by phantoms, the "Night-mare Life-in-Death". Adrift on a ship of dead men, the Mariner is released when, looking at the slimy "water-snakes", he blesses them for their strange beauty. The albatross falls from his neck, but for his crime he is condemned to wander the Earth, preaching reverence for all creatures.

Coleridge imparts his poem with religious and moral lessons serving the end of his work. Sin is the principle idea of this poem, and the poet ruminates the grave consequences of man's hideous and malignant demeanor. John Walsh S. J. states two types of sin: mortal sin and venial sin: the first one is serious and cannot be forgiven while the second is pardonable; that he says: "mortal sin is a serious offence against the law of God... Its penalty is hell.' Whereas, 'venial sin is an act of ingratitude against the all loving God.'" ¹¹ The poem achieves the stated types of sin with its strong impression that it is a product of Coleridge's religious realization of life. The dramatic element is present in the ballad and "the action is largely developed through dialogue."¹²

The repetition of lines, words, phrases or refrains is widely used to increase the dramatic and the emotional tension in the ballad. Eliot argues "that repetition and refrains may contribute an incantatory effect."¹³ There is a significance similitude between

the poet and the mariner in the supernatural sense, that both of them have the peculiar power of insight and observation, that can be reflected through their eyes that can chant the people as Dorothy, William Wordsworth's sister, describes Coleridge's eyes when she says "His eye is large and full, not dark but grey; such an eye that would receive from a heavy soul the dullest expressions; but it speaks every emotion of his animated mind."¹⁴ This gift helps the mariner control his addressee in the wedding party leaving no other choice for him but to listen like a three years old child:

He holds him with his glittering eye--
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years child:
The Mariner hath his will.¹⁵

(Part I, lines 13-16)

Hence the guest is kept still by the mariner's conduct till he finishes his tale without making any action.

Coleridge uses the omniscient narration in his ballad because this type of narration has extravagant devices in which the author has an access to the minds of the characters, commenting on the action, and he has the "freedom of shifting from the exterior world to the inner selves of a number of characters."¹⁶

I. iii The Mariner's Experience of Sin, Punishment and Expiation:

Coleridge introduces two types of sin in his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the first one is the venial sin and the second one is the mortal sin. Moreover he refers the first one to the mariner who kills the albatross, that bird which helps the ship pass its dilemma after being captured by ice from all directions. Hence, it

is a divine help to the mariners to pursue their mission. The poet goes on to relate the intense experience of observing delight in a bird, which the sailors treat like a pet through feeding and playing with it. There is much strangeness in the poem that is hard to interpret; the momentous killing of the albatross seems a totally motiveless act.

And I had done an hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay
That made the breeze to blow!

(Part II, lines 91-96)

So the mariner's rash act is rejected by the crew at the beginning, because they believe that it brings the wind and the breeze that move the ship through the wide sea. But unfortunately they approve and hail the mariner's atrocious deed.

The poet refers the mortal sin to the sailors, who commit it through their unanimous approval of the mariner's action of murder. Then they consider the bird which saves them as a symbol of danger because it brings fog that affects their voyage. They deliberately support the mariner, who does his sin without any intention, and they say it is the right thing to do and the mariner is not to be blamed for he saves the ship. However, they violate the divine law that serves the life of all the creatures and nobody has the right to deprive them of their life without being authorized by God. This matter aggravates their guilt and leads them to a horrible doom:

'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
That bring the fog and mist.

(P II, lines 100-101)

Punishment is soon revealed to the evildoers who meet their various forms of retributions, Coleridge alluded to the irresistible supernatural powers that take control of the ship, and give urgency to the Mariner's narration. This urgency is a cursed one: "I pass, like night, from land to land", he declares, compelled to relate his story with his "strange power of speech". Thus, the first aspect of punishment is universal one, that it affects all the crew of the ship, who are rendered a portrait without life:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

(P II, lines 115-118)

The early step of retribution lasts for seven days through which the mariner discovers that he is the only living person on this horrible ship especially through his friends' eyes. There is neither water nor food to survive the ordeal. The mariner wishes that he could die but, he can not do so for he is a cursed man:

An orphan's curse would drag to Hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is a curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die.

(P IV, lines 257-262)

God's mercy soon cleaves its way through the sea, showing the mariner his miserable situation of stagnation, while observing certain strange creatures playing actively with extreme happiness. The mariner unconsciously blesses these creatures, and he obtains a spiritual relief recurring a sense of hope and redemption through the limited act of blessing. He is mentally relaxed and spiritually relieved as if God sympathized with him through his blessings:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

(P IV, lines 282-287)

Conspicuously, the crew are punished mortally that they have no chance of repentance. While the mariner is given an ample chance to proceed in his atonement. The gradual decrease in the crisis is ostentatiously marked by the mariner who holds the innocent bird round his neck:

The self same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

(P IV, lines 288-291)

The situation of the mariner is completely altered that he witnesses the rise of his crew like apparitions, these dead bodies are moved in supernatural manner as if they were in an exotic world that is never been experienced by human beings

They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;
It had been strange, even in a dream,
To have seen those dead men rise.

(P V, lines 331-334)

Then the mariner passes into a coma because he can't bear the angelic power that moved the ship. Expiation reaches a solid ground through this incident that proves the divine compassion is granted to the mariner.

But why drives on that ship so fast,
Without or wave or wind?

(P VI, lines 422-423)

The mariner saw a religious person, a hermit, who leads a skiff to rescue the mariner from the shipwreck. He asks the religious man to redeem his soul of his sin and to wash the blood of the wronged albatross.

It is the Hermit good!
He singeth loud his godly hymns
That he makes in the wood.
He'll shrive my soul, he'll wash away
The Albatross's blood.

(P VI, lines 509-513)

The Mariner realizes that he has committed a very miserable sin and his atonement must be protracted through preaching and further confession of his crime. So, Coleridge concludes his poem by telling the wedding guest a moral lesson that would save him in life, that is to love all God's creatures

He prayeth well, who loveth well

Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small;

For the dear God who loveth us

He made and loveth all.

(P VII, lines 612-617)

The last testimony set by the poet indicates the main theme of this poem: love and respect for God's Creatures which will lead man to eternal happiness though he commits a venial sin in order to gain the divine mercy. So the Ancient Mariner is relieved from his "spiritual privation by unconsciously blessing the surrounding sea."¹⁸ The symbolic expression of the human experience is highly considered by the poets, artists and psychologists; not least Coleridge sustained "in the somber and chaotic imaginative world of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, where the theme of the pilgrimage, sin, and willful evil, and recognition of that evil is so prominent and powerful."¹⁹

I. iv Conclusion

Samuel Taylor Coleridge employs narratology in an outstanding way to reveal his religious views concerning sin, punishment and atonement through *The Rime of the Ancient*

Mariner, referring to human nature and its ungracious demeanor reflected by the mariner's person, who responds with hostility towards the albatross incurring curse and condemnation to all his crew. Soon after realizing the moral lesson of life he follows the right procedure through blessing all the creatures in the world and regretting his hideous sin. Coleridge provides his poem with a deep religious significance other than the external to serve the intended lesson. Coleridge reflects the concept of poetic justice as it is devised by Thomas Rymer in 1678, "who believes that literature should always depict a world in which virtue and vice are eventually rewarded and punished appropriately."¹⁷ Coleridge uses the form of narration as a way for expiation and redemption, the mariner's task of atonement is incomplete unless he tells and spreads his story to people in a preach-like manner. So, he seeks religious equilibrium between literature and society.

NOTES

- ¹Rewey Belle Inglis, Josephine Spear eds., *Adventures in English literature*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., Olympic edition, 1958), P. 372.
- ²M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981). P., 13.
- ³Richard Dutton, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1986). P., 54.
- ⁴W. L. Renwick, *English Literature 1798-1815*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). P., 140.
- ⁵Raman Selden, ed., *Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present*, (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1988). P., 232.

- ⁶Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971). P., 208.
- ⁷I.A. Richardas, ed., *The Portable Coleridge*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978). P., 396.
- ⁸Clarence A. Brown & John T. Flanagan. *American Literature: A College Survey* (New York: Mc Grow Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961). P., 49-50.
- ⁹Patric Murray,. Literary Criticism" *A Glossary of Major Terms*. (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1978). P., 19.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 18.
- ¹¹John Walsh. S.J., *This is Catholicism*, (New York: A division of Doubleday & Company, 1959). P., 41-2.
- ¹² C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 5th edition, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986). P., 46
- ¹³ T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1957). P., 231.
- ¹⁴I.A. Richardas, ed., P., 5.
- ¹⁵All the Citations for “the Rime of the Ancient Mariner” arte taken from M. H. Abrams ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 2*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968).
- ¹⁶Edward W. Jr. Rosenheim, *What Happens in Literature*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960). P., 71.
- ¹⁷Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (England: York Press, 1992). P., 224.

¹⁸Ben Brice, *Coleridge and Scepticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p., 119.

¹⁹Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy And Religion :Aids to Reflection and mirror of the Spirit*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p., 249.

Bibliography

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981.

_____. et al ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 2*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968.

Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Brice, Ben. *Coleridge and Scepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Brown, Clarence A. & John T. Flanagan. *American Literature: A College Survey*. New York: Mc Grow Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961.

Dutton, Richard. *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1986.

Eliot, T. S. *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1957.

Gray, Martin. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. London: York Press, 1992.

Hedley Douglas. *Coleridge, Philosophy And Religion: Aids to Reflection and mirror of the Spirit*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

- Holman, C. Hugh & William Harmon. ***A Handbook to Literature***. 5th edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986.
- Inglis, Rewey Belle Josephine Spear eds. ***Adventures in English literature***. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., Olympic edition, 1958.
- Murray, Patric. Literary Criticism" ***A Glossary of Major Terms***. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1978.
- Renwick, W. L. ***English Literature 1798-1815***. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Richards, I.A. ed. ***The Portable Coleridge***. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978.
- Rosenheim, Edward W. Jr. ***What Happens in Literature***. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.
- Selden, Raman ed. ***Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present***. London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1988.
- Walsh. S.J., John. ***This is Catholicism***. New York: A division of Doubleday & Company, 1959.