

**Theme of Loneliness in Coleridge's
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"**

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Abstract

S. T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" admits of many levels of reading and surely defies any one level of interpretation. The Mariner's tale is simultaneously a tale of adventure, of romance, of horror, of joy, of comedy, of tragedy. It is a tale of another world of unseen worlds and spirits. It begins in a known world and steadily and quickly moves to the unknown, the mysterious, only to return again to the known, to the traditional. In fact it projects a spiritual journey to and through a world coloured by an active imagination, delineating the alienation of the psychic anguish and restlessness.

I

The poem, is, as some critics view it, an epic of the poet's life's work, where its symbolic nature contains the questions and solutions of many years' speculations. A close reading of the poem, as a work of pure imagination, will bring the reader much nearer to Coleridge's state of mind. He is an imaginative poet who was most of the time feeling detached from the world. In fact his mind was a continual ferment of ideas, and the visionary world he was living in may have been his sole comfort. What is clear is that for much of his life he was especially subject to moods of energetic activity, and to other moods of helplessness and despair.¹

The feeling of detachment and isolation which Coleridge underwent in his life, left its impact on his poetical works. In March 1775 comes the first reference to his regular use of opium as a relief from his psychic stress and mental confusion,² and the sense of isolation which is clearly observed in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", may be an attempt by the poet to project his own psychic state. The poem does not sound as if it has been strenuously worked at. In fact, it has a simplicity of development and a quality of unfolding which truly mirror a genuine feeling. Effectually Coleridge's fame rests on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kublakhan," and these poems were written within a brief span of two years: 1797 and 1798.³

Coleridge says:

All the realities about me lose their natural healing powers, diminish the same, and become not worthy of a thought. Who that thus lives with a continually divided being can remain healthy.⁴

At other times he was forced to face and struggle continually against life-loathing sickness. To escape from the self, the bitter sense of spiritual wildness and loneliness, for Coleridge, was a hopeless task and an ideal which perhaps he

could attain only momentarily through poetry. And one of the major components of the “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is its sense that the mariner cannot avoid himself. It is his own consciousness and his own experience that he carries around with him.

In “Ancient Mariner” the poet writes of a man no longer at peace with himself, and no longer an integrated member of a community. The man undergoes an intense personal suffering, perplexity, isolation horror and fear.⁵ It is a poem concerned with a long journey by sea. We are to follow and closely study the journey of the mariner, a journey which is not just a geographical one but which moves into the strange worlds of the psyche. In other words, through this mental journey, the psychic stress and sense of loneliness is delicately delineated. Travel has often been used as a metaphor for experience and Coleridge uses the voyaging of the mariner as a vehicle for his purpose. The story of the poem is about a voyage to the faraway seas where the mariner shoots the “Albatross”. As a result, he suffers various pains, the greatest of which is his solitude and anguish. When he recognizes the beauty of the fowl sea snakes, and experiences a feeling of love towards them, he regains his ability to pray; thus the spell breaks and he is miraculously returned to his country.

II

Coleridge portrays the mariner’s sense of loneliness and psychic crisis, which is both physical and spiritual, through the concepts of guilt, punishment and redemption in the poem.

The mariner is alone, with no friend, tries to detain one of the three ‘Gallants’ invited to a wedding-feast, as a way to relieve him-self from his loneliness. The marriage feast has a symbolic significance because marriage suggests life, and the mariner is detached from life and suffers from isolation; that is why “The Mariner has his will” to tell his story to the

Wedding-Guest. The word 'will' denotes the speaker's intentional 'will' to escape his spiritual anguish by finding a partner to talk to. The mariner puts out to sea, leaving behind him the well known landmarks:

The ship was cheered, the harbor cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top. (I-21-24)

The speaker creates the striking effect of the fearful and strange seascape to foreshadow the spiritual loneliness the mariner will undergo in the second part of the poem. The mariner is travelling to an alien universe, where "the storm blast came" and the ship was drawn towards the south pole; the seascape is fearful and strange:

And through the drifts the snowy clifts,
Did send a dismal sheen;
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken-
The ice was all between. (I-55-58)

It is into this alien universe, where the pack-ice surrounds the ship "cracked and growled, and roared and howled", that the albatross comes, as a sign of life in the midst of the frozen waste, and the ice splits to allow the ship through. All this will be used as a stage for the internal psychic drama of the mariner. The whole setting mirrors the psychic dilemma and symbolizes the sense of solitude and the spiritual wasteland of the mariner.

In this stagnant and waste atmosphere the albatross appears as a symbol of life and hope. The bird stands for vitality in that dead nature, a scene which utterly contradicts his inner-wasteland. But when the mariner kills the bird, which he does with no apparent motive or pre-meditation, it reveals his spiritual and mental confusion

X. All reference to the poem are taken from *The Oxford Anthology of English Lit.- Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed., by Harold Bloom.

Perhaps the act of killing is an attempt to get rid of his mental instability to equate between his inner-psyche wasteland and that of nature. But even the memory of his act causes his face to show signs of torment:

God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!-
Why lookst thou so?'- With my cross-bow
I shot the Albatross. (I, 79-82)

Then we have the beginning of the Mariner's spiritual agony externalized and "the voyage becomes stranger, a journey into another ocean of the mind, into a silent sea where there is no wind and no water."⁶ This is actually an externalized-inner delineation of the Mariner's psychic and mental state, because he himself, having been cursed and then praised, is used as a scapegoat:

Instead of the cross, the albatross
About my neck was hung. (II, 141-142)

This may be considered the turning point in the Mariner's psychic drama. The act of shooting the bird signifies his mental confusion and rebellion against the divine order which is in a sense against his self. Thus, his separation from God and nature deepens his psychic sense of solitude and spiritual agony, and his long sighs of suffering and remorse are heard. The state of the becalmed and the drought occur under the influence of the sun that denotes the losing of the creative power, or it may signify death, which contrasts the image of the moon that symbolizes fertility and life; but he is cast off and abandoned by all:

One after one, by the star-dogg'd Moon,
Too quick for groan or sigh,

Each turn'd his face with a ghostly pang,
And cursed me with his eye. (III, 225-229)

“It is under the bloody sun that the deep rots, and that the creatures of the deep are slimy things that crawl with legs upon the slimy sea.”⁷ And the heaviest punishment imposed upon the Mariner is the spiritual dryness he feels. The awful moment of his death is suspended, while all his companions’ soul fly by him like arrows into eternity. He remains alone, suffering the worst fate of being bodily alive and spiritually dead. That is the most dreadful sense of isolation and loneliness he experience: bereft from his fellows, isolated from God, unable to communicate with nature, and even having lost his imaginative power, he finds himself face to face with “Life-in-death” which is worst than death itself:

Her lips were red, her looks were free
Her looks were yellow as gold-
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Nightmare life-in-death was she,
(III, 203-207)

The “Life-in-death” meant to Coleridge a mixture of remorse and loneliness. The image of “Life-in-death”, symbolized as a woman, contrasts that of the bride in the wedding-feast which denotes life and creativity. The Mariner is imprisoned in a becalmed ship, which symbolizes the death-in-life state he undergoes and this has paralysed his soul and his power of imagination, which has turned his body into a prison-cage for his soul.

The sense of loneliness is shown to have a destructive effect on the Mariner, in a landless state of a “wide, wide sea,” as he is left alone for seven days in his own fearful wasteland, with the dead around him, the rotting sea, when even his prayers are stifled. His dreadful spiritual agony is so intensified by both physical and spiritual anguish that it makes him yearns

for death, a state which denotes his psychic state of despair; but he does not attain it. Death, if attained, will relieve him of his suffering and solitude:

Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse
And yet I could not die. (IV. 261-62)

Anyone examining the poem closely can observe that Coleridge does not “introduce any element of the marvelous or the supernatural until he has transported the reader beyond the pale of definite geographical knowledge,”⁹ and that the Mariner had left behind all the well-known and familiar places, and that he reaches that silent sea where natural law is suspended. All this marvelous description of the physical solitude is to stress the psychic solitude and wilderness of the Mariner. In such a state he yearns and longs to communicate with the journeying moon and the stars: Thus he intensely delineates the dire state of his spiritual solitude and anguish:

The moving moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside. (IV. 263-66)

The Mariner envies the moon, which is a symbol of loneliness and everlasting silent journeyor, because even the moon has an appointed and native country, that is the blue sky, Where she can rest, whereas the Mariner is lost in the wilderness of his wastelandish spiritual state.

Perhaps this intensely dreadful psychic suffering which is so delicately portrayed, is the result of the breach of the divine link of the soul with the divine power; i.e., this state mirrors the Mariner’s religiously spiritual hollowness. We can say the Mariner is the duplicate of the industrialized hollow-man:

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion.
(The Hollow Men, L.11-12)¹⁰

He is the same hollow man described by Eliot, who spiritually turns out to be a dead-land, a version of the psychic wilderness where God gives nothing in return to those who pray, as the divine-link is broken. Any sort of healing for such sense of desolation and ailment becomes possible only when “the divine grace breaks into this state of life-in-death, not by any endeavour or merit of the Mariner.”¹¹ At first he despises the water-snakes as they swan around the becalmed ship; he tries to pray but:

A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust. (IV, 246-47)

The transition from the sterile desires for death to the preliminary state of recovery and redemption comes when the Mariner unthinkingly blesses the water-creatures:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watch'd rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet track,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flesh of golden fire.
O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gush'd from my heart,
And I bless'd them unaware. (IV. 267-74)

The shadow of the ship, under which the Mariner is overwhelmed by beauty, symbolizes, as Leslie Brisman says, selfhood.¹² On the other hand R. L. Brett declares that this act of the Mariner does not win God's grace, it is God's grace which makes him more receptive to the spiritual power.¹³ The significant point here is that he will only be able to communicate with the outer-world when he becomes capable

of re-establishing the broken divine-link. Only then, he is able to appreciate beauty which stands for divine power, and to experience love which stands for life and activity. At this moment the spell is broken and the albatross, which came as an emissary and sign of relationship between his own world and nature or God but became a token of his sin and psychic agony, falls from his neck and sinks in the sea. As a result he achieves rest and falls asleep

The silly buckets on the deck,
That had so long remain'd,
I dreamt that they were filled with dew;
And when I awake, it rain'd. (V, 297-300)

Just as the draught symbolized spiritual dryness, the rain now represents God's grace, life and reviving of the soul. But even then he cannot release his soul from the solitude and loneliness he is intensely suffering from, and though he regains his imaginative power to continue his journey into his alien visionary universe it seems all as a dream to him and he still feels he is spiritually alienated from his body:

I moe'd, and could not feel my limbs:
I was so light-almost
I thought that I had died in sleep,
And was a blessed ghost. (V. 305-308)

Even when the dead men arise and start operating the ship, his soul is not relieved from the agonies he is experiencing; their stirring adds an extraordinary horror and dread to his sensitive soul:

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. (V. 301-304)

Coleridge uses the spiritual punishment as a mirror through which the direst state of physical and psychic

loneliness is reflected. What a dreadful and awful tableau to feel alone in:

It was night, calm night, the Moon was bright;
The dead men stood together. (VI. 432-33)

And the sense of solitude is the retribution passed on the Mariner:

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head; (VI. 432-33)

We notice that when the ship moves, and when he beholds his home-port, his feeling of loneliness is nearly maintained; moreover, he desires it to be preserved; as if realizing that the whole scene, by which he escaped his bitter state of mind, was a dream, or fears that this new state is only a passing and transitory one:

O let me be awake my God!
Or let me asleep always. (VI, 470-71)

Perhaps, because he is not convinced with his reality and prefers his own visionary world. Although he is returning to his own country. He does not expect anyone to be waiting for him:

The pilot and the pilot's boy
I heard them coming fast:
Dear lord in Heaven! It was a joy
The dead men could not blast. (VI, 505-509)

This is the utter sense of friendlessness and homelessness he experiences. It is "the same aloneness that haunted Coleridge and echoes like doom through his other poems, his letters and notebooks."¹⁴ Though he feels quite happy to see living people, the feeling of homelessness and isolation overshadows his joy:

O sweeter than the marriage-feast,

'Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk
With a goodly company!-

...

While each of his great father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
And youths and maidens gay! (VII. 601-609)

All those people, 'old men', 'babes', 'loving friends', 'youth' and 'maidens', do not seem to be his friend; therefore, his loneliness is maintained even at his country. But the Mariner becomes an emissary who is demanded to travel from land to land to teach by his example love and reverence for all God's creatures.

One wonders, how Coleridge had been able to portray so delicately such a state of spiritual anxiety, helplessness and solitude if he had not undergone such a state himself. That may be one of the reasons for which some critics interpret the poem on biographical basis, and, as George Walley says, Coleridge was suffering from such feelings of loneliness and mental agony during the period he wrote this poem.¹⁵ Therefore, it may allegorize his own feelings of loneliness and mental confusion. Thus, one can easily deduce that the Mariner's agony and burden of intense loneliness and mental anguish mirror the poet's psychic state, which remained with him until his death.

III

Concluding, we can state that Coleridge has used a dramatic tale to convey his spiritual state. The setting, the atmosphere, as well as the feeling experienced by the Mariner are all delicately used to expose the Mariner's psychic loneliness and restlessness. One reason of this psychic anguish may be the breach of the divine-link, whose inspiration marks a change in the Mariner's spirit. "Enthralled by Life-in-death, the

‘Ancient Mariner’ is dead in spirit until given this grace.”¹⁶ The Mariner cannot feel or love. His faithlessness reduce all life to a dark prison. And as soon as the divine-link is re-established, the Mariner regains his psychic power to communicate with nature which is associated by his prayer. The Mariner, who was crying out in the agony of his loneliness of his thirst:

Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink. (II. 108-10)

Which marks his spiritual dryness, is now able to shatter, though partially, the prison bars which have paralysed his soul. The sight becomes clear: man is one with all creatures. As we approach the end of the poem, the emphasis remains on the Mariner’s burden of psychic loneliness and anguish, which is summed up in the gloss,” to teach by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth.”

Notes

1. J.R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830*, (London: Longman Group Ltd. 1985), p.152.
2. E.L. Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of S.T. Coleridge*, (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 188.
3. Graham Hough, “The Poetry of Coleridge” in *Selected Essays*, (Cambridge University Press 1978), p.83.
4. E.L. Griggs ed., *Collected Letters*, p. 189.
5. George Walley, “The Mariner And the Albatross”, in *The Twentieth Century Interpretation of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. James D. Bougler, (New Jersey: Printice-Hall Inc., 1969), p.63.

6. J.R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period*, p. 165.
7. Humphry House, *Coleridge the Clark Lectures*, (London: Compton Printing Ltd., 1967), p. 100.
8. William Watson, "Nineteenth Century Opinions" in *Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner and other Poems*, Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman, ed., (London: Memillan Press Ltd., 1973), p.112.
9. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 77.
- 10.R.L. Brett, *Reason and Imagination*, (Harvard Press, 1961), p. 101.
- 11.Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 45.
- 12.R.L. Brett, *Reason and Imagination*, p. 102.
- 13.George Walley, "The Mariner and the Albatross", p. 77.
- 14.Ibid, p. 78.
- 15.Mario L. D'Avanzo, "Her Looks were Free: the Ancient Mariner and the Harlot", p. 187. ELN, XVII, March 1980, no. 3.

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1. Bloom, Harold and Lionel Trilling (eds). *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, Romantic Poetry and Prose*. London: Oxford U. Press, 1973.
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3. Brett, R.L. *Reason and Imagination*. London: Oxford U. Press, 1961.
4. Brisman, Leslie. *Romantic Origins*. London: Cornell University Press, 1978.
5. D'Avanzo, Mario L. "'Her Looks were Free: the Ancient Mariner and the Harlot". *English Language Notes*. XVII, 3 (March 1980): 185-189.
6. Eliot. T.S. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1954.
7. Hough, Graham. *The Romantic Poets*. London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1965.
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9. Jones, Alun R. and Tydeman William. (eds.) *Coleridge, The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems*. London: Memillan Press Ltd., 1973.
10. Watson, J.R. *English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1985.

ملخص

ان قصيدة كولرج المسماة "قصيدة البحار القديم" "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" يمكن دراستها من مستويات كثيرة وبالتأكيد انها تتجاوز اي تحليل محدد.

فان قصة البحار يمكن تفسيرها كقصة مغامرة او عشق او رعب او مرح او قصة كوميدية او تراجيدية في ان واحد، انها قصة عالم اخر من عوالم وارواح غير مرئية.

وان القصة تبدأ من عالم معروف وتتحرك بثبات وسرعة الى عالم مجهول وغامض، فقط لتعود بالقارئ مرة اخرى الى العالم المعروف التقليدي. انها في الحقيقة تصور نزهة روحية من خلال عالم يلونها خيال نشط، مصورا الوحدة التي تتحكم في روح الفرد.