

# Character Transformation as Epic Element in S. T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

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In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye refers to the "development [which] occurs when a lyric on a conventional theme achieves a concentration that expands it into a miniature epic." (324) Frye sites Spencer's *Epithalamion*, Milton's *Lycidas*, Eliot's later poems, Edith Sitwell's later poems, and many *Cantos* of Pound's as examples of the miniature epic.

Warren Stevenson in his article "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as Epic Symbol" takes Frye's argument and applies it to Coleridge's *Rime* suggesting that it is also a miniature epic. (51) The criteria he uses as bases of his argument are the following: it is of medium length; a) it sets out to teach a people something of their own tradition; b) it employs the supernatural; and, c) it involves a voyage around the world d) which begins and ends in the same place. Stevenson also sites the oral tradition of telling the story in the *Rime* as another characteristic that makes it a miniature epic. (51-2)

I would like to add another characteristic, and that is character transformation. The *Rime* is the story of a sailor who sets out on a journey. He kills an albatross which he and his shipmates believe to be a bird of ill-omen after believing it was the opposite. The mariner and the crew are punished for their crime. However, when the Mariner blesses the water-snakes he rejected earlier, the punishment ends and is journeyed back in the vessel to his country by a group of angelic beings.

What triggers forgiveness is the acceptance of life. In a letter to William Sotheby,

Coleridge says that "everything has a life of its own, and that we are all One Life." (864) Humphry House comments on this point saying that water-snakes "stand for all 'happy living things' " (l. 282) and that the "first phase of redemption, the recovery of love and the recovery of the power to prayer, depends on the recognition of [the Mariner's] kinship [...] with other natural characters." (184-5) Earlier when the mariner tried to pray "A wicked whisper came, and made/My heart as dry as dust." (ll. 246-7) The final two stanzas in Part 4 show the opposite: "O happy living things! no tongue Their beauty might declare: A spring of love gushed from my heart, And I blessed them unaware; Surely kind saint took pity on me, And I blessed them unaware.

"The selfsame moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The albatross fell off, and sank  
(ll. 282-91) Like lead into the sea."

However, the concluding six stanzas of Part 4 and which comprise the character transformation of the Mariner have more in them than what have been said. The section begins with this stanza:

"The moving moon went up the sky,  
And nowhere did abide:  
Softly she was going up,  
(ll. 263-6) And a star or two beside -

The final phrase in the gloss to this stanza announces the beginning of the change within the mariner: "and yet there is silent joy in their arrival." For the first time in the poem, the moon is described in positive terms, "softly" and "joy". Earlier the moon was a sign of doom:

The horned moon, with one bright star  
Within the nether tip.

"One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,  
Too quick for groan or sigh,  
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,  
(ll. 210-15) And cursed me with his eye.  
The moon is the harbinger of evil and Coleridge in a manuscript note says that "it is a common superstition among sailors that something evil is about to happen whenever a star dogs the moon." (Anderson and Buckler, 718n) It lost its ill-omen quality when it shone with full splendor and helped

reassuring the Mariner that good might come out of all of this.

Also, the sea is no longer a witch's caldron where abominations abound as it used to be:

"The very deep did rot: O Christ!

That ever this should be!

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs

(ll. 123-6) Upon the slimy sea.

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"The many men, so beautifull

And they all dead did lie:

And a thousand thousand slimy things

(ll. 236-9) Lived on; and so did I.

In fact, the sea is "bemocked" by the moon, i.e., it is no longer a threat, and the stanza gives a sharp contrast between two extremities: heat and cold. The water is burning a "still and awful red" while the moonbeams are like "April hoar-frost". The image prepares the reader for the blessing that is to fall on the Mariner and which will end his suffering: it will extinguish the fire of thirst, the fire on the sea surface, and the fire inside the Mariner caused by his guilt for the death of his shipmates. The use of "April" also signifies the return of life after death. However, the Mariner "penance more will do." (l. 409) The flames of torment will be replaced, not with the tranquil warmth of life, but with the "hoar-frost" ice-cold spectral half-life, a death-in-life condition (l. 586) which is hardly a life. The Mariner will be a dark and cold figure, "like night", (l. 586) who is unable to socially mingle like the Wedding-Guest.

The stanzas move on systematically: the Mariner's eye moves from the moon whose beams "bemock the sultry main", (l. 277) to the sea "where the ship's huge shadow lay", and from there to the pivotal point of his redemption: the water-snakes. The two stanzas that follow describe the water-snakes within and without the shadow of the ship, through an "exquisite structural balance of two stanzas which answer each other, phrase upon phrase": (Lowes, 60)

"Beyond the shadow of the ship,

I watched the water-snakes:

They moved in tracks of shining white,

And when they reared, the elfish light

Fell off in hoary flakes.

"Within the shadow of the ship

I watched their rich attire:

Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
(ll. 272-81) Was a flash of golden fire.

The Mariner watches the water-snakes

"Beyond the shadow of the ship". The water-snakes move in "tracks of shining white" and

when they "reared, the elfish light/Fell off in hoary flakes." Again, Coleridge uses the

word "hoary" in association with the water-snakes. The lively beginning of this

sequence is emphasized by the use of the words "shining white", "elfish light", and

"hoary". Different descriptions were used

with the "creatures of the great calm":

"The very deep did rot: O Christ!

That ever this should be!

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs

(ll. 242-3) Upon the slimy sea.

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And a thousand thousand slimy things

(ll. 238-9) Lived on; and so did I.

The Mariner is undergoing a transformation that will alter his perceptions and moral values and will redeem him.

In the second stanza, similar terminology is used: "rich attire", "blue, glossy green, and velvet black", "flash", and "golden fire."

Interestingly, fire is now "golden" and is no longer part of the Mariner's curse but it has become a sign of his blessing.

Coleridge continues building up his stanzas gradually to the point when the mariner blesses the water-snakes:

"O happy living things! no tongue

Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,

And I blessed them unaware;

Surely my kind saint took pity on me,

(ll. 272-7) And I blessed them unaware.

The Mariner believes that his guardian saint "took pity" on him and made him bless the water-snakes "unaware". Coleridge repeats

the word "unaware" twice in the stanza in order to emphasize the fact that the act of blessing is an unconscious one. However,

this act happens without the help of an exterior agent. The Mariner thinks that his saint is behind it because of his earlier inability to pray. (ll. 272-7) Like the act of shooting the albatross which was based on the Mariner's accumulative assumption that the albatross is a fiend: "God save thee, ancient Mariner! From the fiends, that plague thee thus! -" (ll. 79-80), the act of

blessing the water-snakes is also an accumulative act which was built up after being exposed to the wonders of nature and "God's creatures of the great calm" after a long and agonizing deprivation. The Mariner's ability to appreciate beauty and life has never died because he feels the gone beauty of his shipmates. (l. 236) He is a human being who can appreciate the "One Life" and only needs a strong drive to awaken it up.

The final stanza describes the Mariner's release from the sign of guilt which was hung around his neck by his shipmates, the dead albatross:

"The selfsame moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The albatross fell off, and sank  
(ll. 288-91) Like lead into the sea."

The fact that the Mariner was able to pray is the only natural result of his blessing the water-snakes. Geoffrey Hartman discussing Coleridge refers to the "link [...] between a stasis in nature and a stasis in the soul."

(47) Nature around the Mariner came to a stand still and was almost rotting dead because the Mariner himself was morally and spiritually dead by violating the "Oneness" of nature by killing the albatross.

His inability to pray came from within: "A wicked whisper came, and made/My heart as dry as dust" (ll. 246-7) and so is his ability to pray. All nature came back to life when the Mariner accepted its all-binding law. In other words, he broke the stasis of nature when he broke the stasis within him and blessed the water snakes.

The parallel in the stasis between nature and the Mariner opens the way to the suggestion of another parallel between the structure of the sequence and the change that befell the Mariner: an iconic parallel. In *Style in Fiction*, Leech and Short say that "literary expression tend to have not only a PRESENTATIONAL function ... but a REPRESENTATIONAL function (miming the meaning that it expresses)". (233) They continue their argument about the "iconic element of language" (233) saying that "A code is iconic to the extent that it imitates, in its signals or textual forms, the meaning that they represent." (233) Fischer and Nanny argue that "iconicity is basic to all human beings - not only to poets - and to their use

and comprehension of language." (4) A closer look at the sequence of the poem that was discussed will clarify this point.

The general atmosphere of the section is completely different from the beginning of Part 4. It is lively and optimistic. The moon ceases to be a sign of doom and is no longer "dogged" by a star. It softly moves in the sky in its full splendor. The water-snakes are no longer a source of disgust to the Mariner, and taken by the splendor of nature and its beings, he blesses them. The section opens with these two stanzas:

"I fear thee, ancient Mariner!  
I fear thy skinny hand!  
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,  
As is the ribbed sea-sand.  
"I fear thee and thy glittering eye,  
And thy skinny hand, so brown." - "Fear not,  
fear not, thou Wedding-Guest!  
(ll. 224-31) This body dropt not down.

A sense of fear is dominant and the Wedding-Guest's description of the Mariner adds to the gothic atmosphere of the stanzas. The Mariner adds to this atmosphere by emphasizing his loneliness, through repetition, and his separation from the grace of God in the middle of a vast ocean:

"Alone, alone, all, all alone  
Alone on a wide, wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony. (ll. 232-5)

Disgust of the creatures of the sea and envy for the grace in which the dead men lie is expressed in lines 236-9:

"The many men, so beautiful  
And they all dead did lie:  
And a thousand thousand slimy things  
Lived on; and so did I.

The Mariner's stasis of the soul is emphasized in lines 244-7:

"I look to heaven, and tried to pray;  
But or ever a prayer had gusht,  
A wicked whisper came, and made  
My heart as dry as dust.

The rest of the stanzas focus on other agonies the Mariner suffers: lack of sleep, the strange preservation of the dead men's corpses and the look on their faces. (ll. 248-62) So when the Mariner begins to feel the beauty of nature, (l. 265) nature begins to loosen its grip on him and starts relieving him by a splendid show of colours (ll. 274-6,

279, 281), and finally let go of him when he admitted its mastery and his belongingness. Clearly Coleridge is taking us on a "voyage into the interior" (Grant, 122) of the Mariner. What happens outside is a mirror reflection, an icon, of what was happening inside. The poem abounds with other instances of such iconic employment of language, such as lines (103-110) which are of the most celebrated lines in English poetry. Lines (45-50) are another example of Coleridge's craft in using words to draw a picture in words. Indeed, the poem is an icon of human sin and redemption.

Coleridge, then, uses all the resources of language to clearly portray a character who sets out on a journey, unaware of the fact that it will turn into a human epic, with him as the protagonist who goes through all its hardships to wake up a "sadder" but a "wiser" (l. 642) man with a genuine appreciation for life in all of its forms.

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تغير الشخصية عنصراً ملحمياً في قصيدة سامويل تايلور كولردج أنشودة البحار العجوز  
تعد قصيدة أنشودة البحار العجوز من قصائد الشاعر الرومانسي الإنكليزي سامويل تايلور كولردج المهمة والتي تناولها الكثير من النقاد والكتاب بالبحث والتحليل المستفيضين.  
وبرغم كون القصيدة تنتمي لصنف القصائد الشعبية الأدبية (literary ballad) إلا أنها تتجاوز هذا التصنيف الضيق لترتقي إلى مرتبة الملحمة. فالقصيدة تعالج رحلة وعذابات بحار يرتكب جريمة بحق الطبيعة والحياة. فيعاقب لأجل ذلك ولا ترفع عنه العقوبة حتى يتقبل ما كان قد رفضه من مخلوقات الطبيعة في السابق.  
يتناول هذا البحث أحد الجوانب الملحمية للقصيدة وهو جانب تغير الشخصية. حيث أن البحار العجوز يقوم بقتل طير قطرس فيعاقب على فعلته. وتتوغل عقوباته من جسدية كفقدان النوم والعطش إلى نفسية وهي الإحاطة بماء البحر والنظرة على وجه رفاقه البحارة الميتين على ظهر السفينة. إلا أن البحار ووسط هذا العذاب يجد في نفسه القدرة على مباركة مخلوقات المحيط لجمالها الذي بهره فيرفع عن نفسه العقوبة التي كان قد أنزلها عليه.  
يعد هذا التغير من خصائص القصيدة الملحمية حيث أن بطل الملحمة يمر بهكذا تغير والذي هو مفتاح تحرره من عذاباته وعودته إلى وطنه كما هو الحال في هذه القصيدة.