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Music of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the rich musicality and layered structural design of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a narrative ballad that fuses elements of folklore, morality, and the supernatural. By focusing on poetic devices such as alliteration, internal rhyme, repetition, and rhythmic modulation, the study examines how Coleridge crafts a sonic texture that enhances the poem's emotional and symbolic depth. The analysis adopts a stylistic and formalist approach to trace the Mariner's psychological and spiritual journey—one of self-discovery, penance, and eventual transformation situated within a multi-tonal narrative structure. Special attention is given to the interplay between realism and fantasy, especially through Coleridge's use of spectral imagery, metaphysical motifs, and dreamlike sequences. The paper argues that Coleridge's innovation lies in his ability to integrate sound and meaning, reshaping traditional ballad conventions to express profound philosophical and moral insights, particularly the sanctity of all living things and the redemptive power of love.

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الموسيقيّة في قصيدة أنشودة البحار العتيق

م.م أسماء تقي ياسر / المديرية العامة لتربية واسط، وزارة التربية
م.م هدى خضير عباس / المديرية العامة لتربية واسط، وزارة التربية

المُستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الموسيقية الغنية والبنية الطباقية لقصيدة صموئيل تايلور كوليردج *"أنشودة البحار العتيق"*، وهي أنشودة سردية تمزج بين عناصر الفولكلور، والموعظة الأخلاقية، والعالم الخارجي الغيبي. ومن خلال التركيز على الأساليب الشعرية مثل الجناس، والجناس الداخلي، والتكرار، والتنوع الإيقاعي، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية صياغة كوليردج لنسيج صوتي يُعزّز العمق العاطفي والدلالي في القصيدة. تعتمد الدراسة منهجًا أسلوبيًا وشكليًا لتتبع الرحلة النفسية والروحية التي يخوضها البحار العتيق، وهي رحلة اكتشاف للذات، وتوبة، وتحول داخلي، تتجلى ضمن هيكل سردي متعدد النغمات والمستويات. وتولي الدراسة اهتمامًا خاصًا للتداخل بين الواقعية والخيال، لاسيما من خلال استخدام كوليردج للصور الطيفية، والرموز الماورائية، والمشاهد الحالمة. وتخلص الورقة إلى أن ابتكار كوليردج يكمن في قدرته على دمج الصوت بالمعنى، مما يُعيد تشكيل تقاليد الأناشيد الشعرية التقليدية لتجسيد رؤى فلسفية وأخلاقية عميقة، خاصة ما يتعلق بقدسية الحياة بكل أشكالها وقوة الحب التحريرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الموسيقية، الخلاص، العناصر الخارقة، الشكل القصصي (الأنشودة)، الرمزية

Introduction

"The Ancient Mariner," which is 625 lines long, is among the best ballads known in English literature (Varshney, n.d.). The poem has received considerable criticism. The figure of the Ancient Mariner, who can hardly be identified with any normal human being, the supernatural happenings, and the unusual atmosphere that prevails in the poem have provoked much debate (Bougler, 1969).

This study adopts a formalist stylistic approach to observe the sonic and structural features of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Entrenched in formalism, this framework highlights the intrinsic properties of the text, mainly its language, structure, and aesthetic devices, rather than contextual, biographical, or historical scopes. Drawing upon principles of Russian Formalism (e.g., Shklovsky's defamiliarization) and later growths in stylistics, the analysis focuses on how literary devices such as alliteration, internal rhyme, rhythm, and repetition purpose as carriers of meaning. This study also integrates insights from Murad and Khavirad (2023), who claim that in classical literary traditions, rhythmic and phonetic patterns are not only decorative but integral to moral and sensitive expression. By tracing the interaction between musical form and thematic development, the paper highlights how Coleridge's poetic strategies transform the Mariner's journey into an immersive, redemptive experience.

Numerous assumptions have been proposed regarding whether the poem represents a dream, an opium-induced vision, a creation of pure imagination, or a reflection of the poet's inner emotions (Warren, 1969). The

poem is a tale of criminality and penalty, repentance, and compromise (House, 1969). After killing the innocent bird of good omen, the Ancient Mariner bears agonizing suffering, the greatest of which is his loneliness and spiritual anguish (Maher, 1977). Unaware, he praises the water-snakes, and he can pray (Graham, 1960). He is helped to return miraculously to his home by a group of innocent spirits, and he utters his moral: "He prayeth best who loveth best" (Watson, 1985). Although Coleridge's *Collected Poems* propose rich insights, this study draws primarily on Watson's (1985) explanation because his critical edition offers a synthesized moral reading and emphases on the poem's spiritual and ethical scopes. Watson highpoints the poem's concluding message "He prayeth best who loveth best"as the Mariner's final realization, enclosing the poem not merely as a narrative but as a didactic and redemptive journey.

Azizi Murad and Khavirad (2023) explore the connection between formal criticism and linguistic countenance within Islamic heritage texts, highlighting how artistic literary principles interweave with organizational linguistic structures. Their analysis proves that stylistic devices, such as repetition, rhyme, and rhythmic variation, are not mere accompaniments but initial to both meaning-making and aesthetic influence in traditional prose and poetry. Much like Coleridge's use of musicality to enhance thematic difficulty, they claim that in Arabic-Islamic literary traditions, rhythmic and phonetic patterns serve a similar purpose to supplement emotional quality and ideological nuance (Azizi Murad & Khavirad, 2023).

The Mariner was condemned, as a form of penance, to roam from place to place, clarifying by his example the importance of love and respect for all beings. He taught the Wedding Guest that love is the best form of prayer, as it aligns with the very nature of existence (House, 1969).

James D. Bougler (1969) asserts that there are two major themes in the poem: the primary theme concerns guilt, persecution, and redemption, while the secondary theme revolves around imagination and artistic vision. Robert Penn Warren (1969) enlarges on these two themes by explanation that the dominant focus of the poem can be realized as the essential narrative or moral lesson, while the subordinate theme reproduces the imaginative and value-laden outline through which the story is carried.

The contrast between the world of everyday life, bridal rites, and wedding guests and the world of the journey at sea, presented in the poem's opening, highlights the difference between the inner, imaginative world and the outer rational world (Walley, 1969). The poem emphasizes a realm of "pure imagination" and dream-like narrative, structured into two phases: the fall and the redemption (Warren, 1969).

According to Khalid Maher, the Mariner's use of his bow to kill the divine bird, the albatross, is the primary crime that leads to the crew's downfall. This crime is engulfed in mystery and a lack of motive. The

poem itself gives no apparent reason for the crime, and the Mariner appears to have no conscious awareness of the consequences of this deed (Maher, 1977).

J.R. Watson asserts that the voyage after the crime is committed becomes a strange journey into the extreme reaches of the mind into a soundless sea where there is no breeze, no water, and slimy creatures swarm upon the surface while the sailors experience strange hallucinations (Watson, 1985).

The Ancient Mariner is portrayed as both blamed and redeemed, as evidenced by the lines, "Instead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung," symbolizing the burden of his guilt (Coleridge, as cited in Watson, 1985). The dangling of albatross's dangling was meant to keep the Mariner constantly aware of his sin, while the ship's paralysis, "As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean"—illustrates the Mariner's helplessness in seeking redemption (Watson, 1985).

Ibrahim Hough argues that this state represents "a complete paralysis of the will," as the Mariner, driven by unbearable thirst, bites his arm and drinks his blood to announce the approaching ship (Hough, as cited in Buchon, 1969).

While preceding studies have extremely explored *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in terms of its ethics, scriptural, and mental scopes, concentrating on themes such as responsibility, redemption, the paranormal, and the Mariner's spiritual alteration (Maher, 1977; Watson, 1985; Hough, 2003), this study proceeds a dissimilar path. It swings attention from *what* the poem says to *how* it says it, investigating the complicated musicality, rhythmic variations, and poetic strategies that Coleridge employs. Building on visions from Azizi Murad and Khavirad (2023), who attach sound and structure to thematic strength in traditional texts, this study contends that Coleridge's use of alliteration, internal rhyme, repetition, and stanzaic operation is not decorative but essential to the reader's expressions and intellectual engagement with the poem. Thus, rather than understanding meaning only through narrative or symbolic themes, this paper discloses how form itself converts meaning, contributing to the Mariner's moral message in a way preceding thematic studies have not fully addressed**.**

Symbolism, Supernatural Forces, and the Mariner's Spiritual Journey

Aboard are Life-in-Death and her mate Death, who gamble for the sailors' souls. The lady wins the Mariner, condemning him to a fate worse than death: a dreadful life in Death. This spectral female figure begins to work on the Mariner, who is left "alone on a wide, wide sea," feeling utterly severed from humanity. Consumed by guilt, the Mariner must endure and atone through deep remorse (House, 1969).

"He becomes absorbed in self-contempt when he discovers:

The Many men so beautiful, And they all dead lie:

And a thousand, thousand slimy things
Lived on, and so did I."
(П. 236-239)

The crew protests that the slimy things should live while the beautiful men lie dead. Even in his remorse, the Mariner remains, in his pride, opposed to Nature. As a first step toward his deliverance, he comes to recognize the beauty of the water snakes and praises them without knowing it. He feels an impulse rising within him that brings him back to life: "A spring of love gushed from my heart / And I blessed them unaware" (House, 1969, p. 64).

The Holy Mother sends the Mariner sleep and refreshing rain. According to Harding, this marks the beginning of his recovery, though it remains "incomplete" because he never again belongs to a settled community; instead, he wanders from place to place, compelled to retell his story (Hill, 1983, p. 97).

Later in life, Coleridge emphasized that it was "an enormous blunder to represent the Ancient Mariner as an old man on board ship... He had told his story ten thousand times since the voyage, which was in his early youth and fifty years before" (Hill, 1983, p. 97).

According to Humphrey House, the poem's dominant circling motif is the sanctification beneath the moonlight. Just as the albatross is not to be regarded as a mere bird, the water snakes are also symbolic. They represent all "happy living creatures." The Mariner's recognition of his connection with other natural beings becomes the foundation for the central stage of transformation: the renewal of love and the regaining of emotional balance. The symbolic release of guilt marks this pivotal moment: "The albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea" (House, 1969, p. 185).

Since the poem is a journey into the unknown, it is filled with supernatural agents. The mariners rise up as ghosts, inspired by "the blessed troops of angelic spirits, sent down by the invocation of the guardian saint" (House, 1969, p. 185). The Polar Spirit, who seeks vengeance for the killing of the bird, is eventually persuaded to cease his revenge, but only on the condition that the Mariner must endure further penance. On his journey back home, the Mariner encounters the Hermit, the Pilot, and the Pilot's boy, who goes mad upon seeing him, thinking he is a devil. The Mariner cannot correctly communicate with them, except for the Hermit, whose spiritual strength allows him to compel the Mariner to tell his story, one that bears the heavy weight of compulsion:

I pass Like night from Land to Land,
I have strange power of speech
That moment that his face I see

I know the man that must hear me
To him my tale I teach. 14
(VII. 586-590)

George Walley argues that the Mariner does not anticipate being welcomed back by the living, yet, having returned from the dead, he is overwhelmed with joy upon seeing people and hearing human voices. He sees old men, young men, youths, and maidens, but they are not his family or friends: “O happy living things! no tongue / Their beauty might declare” (Walley, 1969, p. 80).

However, the Mariner’s return is not a complete restoration. “At an uncertain hour,” the burden of his oceanic experience resurfaces, compelling him to retell his tale narrative whose whole meaning and implications are only partially understood by him (Walley, 1969, p. 80).

His return to the harbor and the land is perhaps the most jarring part of the story, as it marks a reentry into a world governed by sensory realism and conventional order. Unsurprisingly, the ship, the bodies, and the spirits vanish with the return of normality. The destruction of the ship once thought to be the final act of the Polar Spirit, seems unlikely, given that the Spirit is dismissed at the end of Part V, “returneth southward.” Walley suggests that it is more plausible to interpret the destruction as the work of angelic troops. Thematically, this destruction is significant: on the level of the primary theme, the angelic spirits erase the crime by annihilating the "criminal ship" and the corpses; on the level of the secondary theme, they bring closure through the power of storms (Walley, 1969, p. 80).

Before proceeding any further in discussing the moral lesson of the poem, it is important to explain the significance of the bird. Warren (1966) argues that the Mariner did not simply kill a bird; instead, in the poem, the haunting presence of the bird becomes a symbol for the haunting of man himself. When the albatross first appears, it is welcomed with reverence: “As if it had been a Christian soul, / We hailed it in God's name” (Warren, 1966, p. 61).

Thus, the crime is symbolically portrayed as a murder. This idea is strongly reinforced when the cross is removed from the Mariner’s neck and replaced by the lifeless body of the bird—a transformation that underscores the depth of his guilt. In contrast, Walley (1969) offers a different interpretation of the bird’s symbolism. He contends that the killing of the albatross signifies the Mariner’s rejection of a social offering, and the bird can be identified with anything Coleridge might have personally rejected or disliked (Walley, 1969, p. 83).

Ultimately, the final lesson conveyed in the poem is to serve as a model of moral teaching: that the universal principle is love and charity. However, given the context of the Mariner's grave crime, the moral carries an ironic undertone. He prays best, who loveth best.

"All things both great and small
For the dear God who Loveth us
He made and Loveth all."
(VII-614-617)

The Mariner, as a recipient of God's love, is expected to extend that love to all creatures in the universe. He tells the Wedding Guest that "human love, which you take to be an occasion for merriment, must be understood in the context of universal love, and only in this context does it achieve its meaning" (Maher, 1977, p. 144).

As a result of this profound lesson, the Wedding Guest loses interest in the wedding celebration and is left robbed of his happiness, a symbolic loss of innocence and joy. The Mariner is condemned to be a lifelong wanderer, doomed to "pass like night, from land to land" with the burden of his tale, driven by the agonizing need to recount his story to all he meets (Maher, 1977, p. 146). This portrays the poet's fear of isolation and alienation, suggesting that being cut off from community life is akin to a kind of spiritual hell.

Watson (1981) asserts that the final part of the poem acknowledges the need for human connection and the peace that comes from shared understanding. He argues that all elements, both human and natural, participate in a celebration of interconnected existence, promoting a sense of universal love and goodwill (Watson, 1981, p. 105).

Through his solitude, the Mariner has come to appreciate the blessing of companionship and has developed a newfound compassion for all creatures. However, tragically, he must once again depart from human society in search of new listeners for his cautionary tale. Beyond its moral and thematic depth, the poem's intellectual brilliance lies not only in Coleridge's use of traditional ballad forms but also in his remarkable poetic invention. Though he works within the constraints of the classic ballad stanza, Coleridge achieves vivid emotional effects through devices such as alliteration, internal rhyme, and repetition, as seen in the unforgettable depiction of the ship slowing to a stop (Maher, 1977, p. 151).

Contained within these thirty-two lines, twelve notable examples of alliteration can be identified, particularly the use of the letters "b" and "f" in the first two lines (Maher, 1977). Furthermore, there are three significant instances of internal rhyme and six key examples of recurring words or expressions. What truly sets

this passage apart, however, is not merely the presence of these literary devices but the sophisticated and clever way in which rhetorical methods are employed with variation and shift. The poem begins with an energetic tone, propelling itself actively into the Pacific Ocean on waves of rhyme and alliteration, but in the second stanza, the tone changes as the ship becomes trapped in a motionless, suffocating calm. At this point, the use of alliteration fades and eventually disappears altogether.

The lively rhythm and internal rhymes of the initial stanza vanish like the wind, leaving behind only a faint echo of rhyme between "speak" and "break" (Watson, 1981, p. 109). The sudden repetition that echoes the ship's swift motion gives way to a heavy, prolonged "O" vowel sound, accentuating the cruel immobility of the oppressive sun. As the calm persists, repetition begins to convey an emotional response, giving the stillness a life and presence of its own. While the Mariner remains physically stranded in this stagnation, he undergoes a profound emotional transformation internally, intensified by the accumulation of recurrent words and graceful alliteration (Maher, 1977, p. 152).

Coleridge introduced inventive techniques in his poem that elevate it beyond the typical works of his era, such as his use of the traditional ballad stanza form. The first and third lines mirror the iambic tetrameter, while the second and fourth adhere to the iambic trimester. Coleridge disrupts the rhythmic monotony by occasionally extending his stanzas to five, six, or even nine lines (Watson, 1981). These extended stanzas, especially prominent in the supernatural sections of the poem, serve several purposes; most notably, they enhance the emotional weight of the events by expanding their tonal resonance (Maher, 1977, p. 157).

“With throats unslacked,
with black lips backed
We could nor laugh nor wail”

“Through utter drought all dumb we stood
I bite my arm I sucked the blood And cried” "A sail! a sail!"
(П-157-61)

At times, chiefly in the context of the sailors’ ever-changing responses to the Mariner’s movements, the technique of incremental repetition is employed to firmly drive a scene in the reader’s memory (Watson, 1981):

“And I had done a hellish thing,
But no sweet bird follow
Nor any day, for food or play,

Come to the Mariner's hollo!”

“Nor dim nor red, like God's own head
The glorious sun uprist.
Then all averred, I had killed the bird
That brought the fog and mist,
'T was right, said they, Such bird to slay
That bring the fog and mist.27”

At other times, development is responsible for a means for escalating moments of lyrical intuition, for example, when the "troops of blessed spirits" in Part V progressively raise their morning hymn (Walley, 1982):

“A round, around flew each sweet sound
Then darted to the sun;
Slowly the sounds came back again,
Now mixed, now one by one”

“Sometimes a- dropping from the sky
I heard the sky lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!”

“And now't was like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute,
And now it is an angel's song,
That makes the heavens be mate.”

Watson imitates on the old-style technical approach. Travel aids as a metaphor for knowledge, while repetition represents divine growth. The setting and events of the story subsidize the internal practicality of the Mariner's guilt-ridden, troubled psyche (Watson, 1982). A stark contrast exists between the man who stays

at home and the man who ventures into the broader world. The Mariner sets sail, leaving behind acquainted landmarks.

Lewis and Burger (1993) propose that the poem's energetic and eccentric rhythm reproduces an imitation of older folk-ballad traditions, despite its apparently incompatible anapestic meter.

The poem is indebted to the contemporary parody of Lewis and Burger, incorporating elements such as paranormal themes, recurrent use of internal rhyme, archaic spelling, and dated diction. Notwithstanding its debt to the ballad ritual, the poem is thematically wealthier and more tortuously made in terms of method than any ballad written before or after (Lewis & Burger, 1993).

The creation of a proper atmosphere is the triumph of Coleridge's art. Coleridge makes the supernatural appear natural and presents it straightforwardly and undeniably. The visionary nature of the paranormal in Coleridge makes the postponement of incredulity effortless. The paranormal in Coleridge lacks a consistent or stable character. It is difficult to determine how much of it is real and how much is dreamlike or simply an illusion (Watson, 1982).

The supreme strength of Coleridge lies in his marvelous quality of dreaming. He was a great dreamer of dreams. He took a keen interest in illusions, hallucinations, magic, and dreams. The poem is a piece of dream poetry. He always escapes from the world of realism into the mystical world of dreams (Hough, 2003).

Besides the dream quality, Coleridge uses the supernatural atmosphere and the occult forces. The Bridal Visitor is seized by the impressive eye of the sailor and is bound to listen to his story for a hidden reason (Hough, 2003).

A charming simplicity marks Coleridge's style, and he discarded the heroic couplets to experiment with various ancient meters, mostly medieval. In this poem, he employs the traditional meter with faultless mastery. His poetry was a poetry of revolt, in contradiction to the artificial poetic expression of the 18th century and the tyranny of heroic couplets (Watson, 1982).

Conclusion

The poem is highly sophisticated, but Coleridge disguises this by his brilliant use of every conceivable device from the balladist's art: alliteration, onomatopoeia, internal rhyme, and above all, repetition, so that every

phrase seems carved from ice in one single and brilliant stroke. The poem is an excellent narrative, energetic and matchless. The flawlessly well-ordered story unfolds unimpeded through a world of the unknown and the miraculous; the form accepted by Coleridge is an old-style one, the ballad. The thematic and technical importance manipulates the rich moral lesson for which the poem is written. The Mariner has experienced worldly influences marked by human pride and hatred towards other creatures. Here, he contrasts the two paths of life: following the pleasures of the world and seeking God in the world. He has known intense suffering and solitude. He felt so lonely as if God had deserted him, though God was everywhere, because he was not God-minded due to his pride. However, he comes out of this experience with the result that nothing is more beautiful than the company of pious men and women, and praying to God will thrill his heart with a joy that is purer, nobler, and sweeter than the pleasure of joining a marriage festivity.

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