

The Interplay of Faith and Imagination: An Analysis of Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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Abstract

The nineteenth century occupies a remarkable place in literary history, as it was an era in which a literary revolution took place alongside social and economic revolutions. The early years of the French Revolution and the industrial revolution that took place paralleled revolutions in the political order. In the 19th century painful divisions were felt as the scientific, rational thought did little to satisfy the emotional needs of the individual, while actively corroding the religious beliefs of the individual. Poets like Coleridge rose against these increasingly rationalistic and skeptical tendencies and served as reflectors and generators of faith. The changing social, cultural and philosophical trends are mirrored in a very exquisite manner in the poetry of the age. And my objective is to evaluate the changing responses of such a thinker like Coleridge to these basic issues, as reflected in his poetic language. For this study, I have analyzed the stylistic devices such as the figures of speech, images and symbols employed by the poets of the nineteenth century in order to yield significant interpretation of their work. Apart from doing a linguistic analysis, an attempt has also been made to do a cultural analysis of a wide rubric-of the various trends and movements of the era, which affected the philosophy, ideals and attitudes of these poets. Such an in-depth linguistic and cultural analysis of faith and reason in the nineteenth century is pertinent, as the same question has also been debated in India.

Interplay of Faith and Imagination

In the nineteenth century Benthamism emphasized the importance of reason and there was rising atheism as well, as a result of the advancement of science and technology.

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However, though there were many supporters and followers of the Utilitarian philosophy of Bentham, the 19th century also witnessed various movements and intellectual trends spearheaded by poets and thinkers, many of them that came as a reaction to the excesses of the French revolution, the Industrial revolution, the materialism and lack of faith, which the age of reason brought with it. Therefore, the other position alternative to Bentham is faith and imagination manifested by the Romantic Movement, which was mainly propagated by Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Bentham is the exponent of reason and senses as source of knowledge and reality as something concrete, quantifiable and measurable. It is this worldview that had been in the making in Europe since the Renaissance, had culminated in the enlightenment project and fructified as the Industrial Revolution. But, its impact on the life and worldview of the people was very disturbing because it was in ultimate terms anti-God and anti-faith.

Therefore, nineteenth century England saw a fierce debate between faith and reason. The debate involved the question of nature of reality, nature of knowledge, and the object of knowledge, means of knowledge and validation of knowledge. A number of great minds engaged in the debate on both sides- Bentham, Macaulay, Mill, Coleridge, Carlyle and Newman each of them asserting their convictions and beliefs. The debate was reflected in the literature of the era both fiction and poetry.

During this time there was the “movement in English Literature which we variously call the Romantic Revival, or the Return to Nature, or the Renascence of Wonder”, (Grierson et al 274) according as we think of mainly of Scott or Wordsworth or Coleridge. This movement was a part of a far wider movement that affected the whole of Western Europe. This was a point in this stretch of time that was marked by the French Revolution. The Fall of the Bastille, “its actual beginnings, and its successive stages, is, from about 1780 to 1800, the predominant factor in mental outlook of political theorists, polemical writers, novelists, and even dramatists and poets.

From about 1800, on the contrary, the moral and imaginative stir caused by the great upheaval enters into a new literature as one of its elements, and combines with the diverse impulses that give birth to English Romanticism in its definitive form. The influence of the revolution after 1800 will be, therefore, part and parcel of the study of the full grown Romantic movement.”(Legouis et al 671-672).

The Romantic period was an era in which literary revolution took place alongside social and economic revolutions. In some histories of literature the Romantic period is called the ‘Age of Revolutions’ or ‘The Age of Romanticism’. The best known Romantic poets were Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats and their poetry was dependent on various features peculiar to their time: a reaction against previous literary styles, arguments with eighteenth century and earlier philosophers, the decline in formal Anglican worship and the rise of dissenting religious sects, and the rapid and unprecedented industrialization of Britain and consequent changes in its countryside. Above all, however, it was the impact of the French Revolution, which gave the period its most distinctive, and urgent concerns as mentioned earlier. Following the Revolution itself, which began in 1789, Britain was at war with France on continental Europe for nearly twenty years while there was massive repression of political dissent in Britain.

“The Age of Romanticism is a title imposed by later historians on the four decades after 1790, but a number of writers who lived during that turbulent time had recognized that in both its literature and thought it constituted an era that was distinctive, vital, and innovative, and had identified its distinctive features by the term “the spirit of the age”. (Jonathan et al vii). Most of the thinkers concurred that this spirit created diverse ways of thinking, imagining, perceiving and feeling which were all formed by the outbreak, hope, promise and outcome of the Revolution which was considered to be the ‘master theme of the epoch’ in which they lived as Shelley, a Romantic poet had declared in a letter to Byron. On the whole, it is a very obvious fact that the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary fever was not connected in just a trivial way with the growth of English Romanticism. It stimulated latent energies and called forth individual temperaments. Therefore, from a psychological point of view the literature produced by the Romantics exhibited mixed characteristics. Those who were impressed by the revolution at its initial stages were enthusiastic supporters, guided by sensibility and swayed by imagination.

Even after what they considered to be the failure of the revolutionary promise, these thinkers and enthusiasts did not surrender their hope for a reformation of humankind and its social world: instead they endeavoured to transfer that hope from violent political revolution to a quiet but drastic revolution in the moral and imaginative nature of the human race.

Thus one can observe that the “revolutionary literature reflects the conflict in the minds of men. That conflict deeply stirs the soul of the time, and hastens the germination of the new art”(Legouis et al 972).

The Romantics placed a high value on feelings, imagination and personal experience of the artist. The Romantics believed that the best poetry was that in which the greatest intensity of feeling was expressed. The degree of intensity was affected by the extent to which a poet’s imagination had been at work. As Coleridge saw it, imagination was the supreme poetic quality, a force that made the poet a God like being. Since the English Romantic literature grew in specific historical contexts during a phase when society was mechanized and becoming increasingly impersonal as a result of the Industrial Revolution, it was a new world in which individuals lost their identity and felt anonymous. The writers of this time wanted to correct this imbalance by giving greater value to the individual sensibility and to the individual consciousness. Their poetic revolutions aimed at greater individual freedoms. The Romantic period in literature, “was an age in which the uniqueness of the individual would be celebrated. It was a time of war, a time of ideals, a time of freedom, and of oppression. Its conflicts and contradictions breathed new life into literature and, in particular into poetry”. (223).

Coleridge was like those of his Romantic contemporaries in many ways: his interests involved theology, philosophy, aesthetics and contemplation of the divine presence in nature. These interests revolved around his insatiable quest for unity, a unity that simultaneously embraces the multiplicity of the world. Moreover as with Wordsworth, Coleridge also combines his theoretical ideas in his poetry. However, he abandons Wordsworth's notion of poetry for the common man, and uses lofty language, poetic diction, and subject matter that is specialized. While he still holds a reverence for Nature inherent to Romantic literature, his poems are not exclusively based around the natural. His poetry frequently communicates a sense of the mysterious, supernatural and an extraordinary world. Wordsworth stated that he wanted to explore everyday subjects and give them a Romantic or supernatural coloring; by contrast, Coleridge wanted to give the supernatural a feeling of everyday reality.

Many poems by Coleridge explore a mystical and supernatural world. Unlike Wordsworth, who concentrates on the everyday world of the present, Coleridge turns to the romance and mystery of the past.

Both the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge contributed to the Lyrical Ballads after a decision was made as to the respective shares of the two poets. “Wordsworth was to give the ‘charm of novelty to things of everyday’, while Coleridge’s province was to be ‘persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic,’ but with an attachment to them ‘of a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith’. (Coleridge 6)

The line above sums up Coleridge’s conception of pleasure derived from dramatic and poetic fiction even when the audience or reader knows well that what he perceives or hears is nothing but fiction. But he willingly suspends his disbelief for the duration of the representation or reading to enjoy this imaginary world. He knows that this is the only way to get pleasure from a play or a poem, or to be the recipient of truths perceived by the playwright or the poet. And thus he takes a direct and active part through his imagination in making the purely fictional credible and probable. Coleridge throws more light on the phrase ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in Chapter xxiii of the *Biographia Literaria* in his comments on the old Spanish play ‘Don Juan’. Speaking of man’s natural pleasure in the supernatural he says: “Its influence is abundantly proved by the one circumstance that it can bribe us into a voluntary submission of our better knowledge, into suspension of all our judgment derived from constant experience, and enable us to peruse with the liveliest interest the wildest tales of ghosts, wizards, genii, and secret talismans. On this propensity so deeply rooted in our nature, a true poet may raise a specific dramatic probability, if the whole of his work be in harmony: a dramatic probability, sufficient for dramatic pleasure, even when the component characters and incidents border on impossibility. The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this too with our eyes open and with our judgment perdue behind the curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will: and meantime, only not to disbelieve.”(189) Thus, Coleridge says that the illusion is enjoyed consciously nor unconsciously but only when the judgment is perdue and the consciousness is temporarily and willingly suspended.

He was the chief spokesman of faith and imagination - he challenged the logic and rationality that took precedence in all forms of written expression.

He argued vehemently and at length against the anti-God philosophy of Bentham and he focused mainly on imagination as the key to poetry. Coleridge's ideas on imagination are the core of his theory of poetry as well as aesthetics. He considered imagination to be the soul of literature and particularly of poetry. He believed that the magic of poetry is in the fertility, authenticity and creativity of the imagination. In 1817 he published the *Biographia Literaria*, which contains an important discussion of the workings of the poetic imagination and reveals the extent of his thinking about the nature of literature. It has become one of the most influential of works of criticism. In the *Biographia Literaria*, which is a work of seminal importance he defines Esemplastic imagination. In fact one can assertively state that to Coleridge goes the honor of having given an adequate theory of the imagination for the first time in the history of English criticism. It was Coleridge who took those ideas that were in their incipient stage and gave it a final form. In the 18th century writers considered imagination and fancy to be synonymous terms. However, to Coleridge the distinction between fancy and imagination presented itself as the distinction of two kinds of philosophy.

Here is Coleridge's definition of fancy in which he clearly demarcates the distinction between fancy and imagination which is the central point of his critical theory:

“Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.”(202) Thus, according to Coleridge fancy is inferior to imagination because instead of creating new things, it merely shuffles and rearranges into patterns ready-made materials, i.e. the ‘fixities and oddities.’ So, rather than composing a completely original concept or description, the fanciful poet simply reorders concepts, putting them in a new and, possibly, fresh relationship to each other. He asserts that fancy operates independent of the artist's emotional state. He goes on to say that it creates “merely a world of lifeless forms, unconnected and devoid of motive power”.(xxxiii).

He considers fancy to be associative, mechanical, sterile and superficial. The images of fancy he says “have no connection, natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by means of some accidental coincidence.”(L.S.Sharma 71).

To fancy he allocates an inferior position and calls it the passive power, whereas, the imagination he considers to be the higher active power. He clarifies that the essential difference is that imagination modifies the things it combines and that is a process of living growth. Fancy, on the other hand can combine and recombine, but it can never transform the objects involved. He divides imagination into two main components- primary and secondary imagination:

“The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation.” (Coleridge 202) Though, this statement initially may sound like mere metaphysical babble, a discriminate reading gives an understanding of the weight of the idea behind it. Here, Coleridge summarizes the great struggle and triumph of his life - his triumph over the old tradition of Locke and Hartley, which had assumed that the mind in perception was wholly passive. According to him the mind is not passive or dormant but operates very actively in the act of perception. To use Basil Willey’s words, “in the commonest everyday acts of perception we are making our own world. We make it, indeed, not ex nihilo, but out of influxes proceeding from Nature, or as Coleridge preferred to say, ‘the infinite I am’. Whatever we perceive is what we have made in response to these stimuli; perception is an activity of the mind, not a merely mechanical registering of impressions.” (Wiley 14). So, the primary imagination is the main faculty of all human perception in everyday life. It is a form of creative power, which gives individuality to the rational insight. From his definition we can also understand that Coleridge believed that the imagination is essentially divine. The creative imagination of God is re-enacted in our own imagination, and through this faculty we can raise our consciousness to its ultimate potential and become one with the divine Creator.

The secondary imagination is more uniquely human, an “echo” of the primary that coexists with the “conscious will.” It is the vital, active imagination that strives to find the spiritual meaning within things that can perceive the unity that interconnects this world of multiplicity.

Here Coleridge distinguishes between the perception of the common man and that of the artist.

The latter is the secondary imagination or the esemplastic imagination. According to him, the imagination of the artist is an echo of God's imagination i.e. ; when the reason of the artist is associated with the reason of God, then his imagination discerns nature-which is nothing but the externalized thought of God. "Coleridge's definition of the secondary imagination implies a reconciliation of opposites which is one of his fundamental principles and his greatest contribution to critical theory." (L.S.Sharma 81) This is expressed often in his poetry and prose, where he theorizes about the creative power of the imagination as the force that reconciles all opposites. He asserts that through juxtaposition ideas, concepts, and descriptions are made clear. The more imaginative the juxtaposition is, the more exciting the poem becomes.

Moreover it is worth noting that, in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge insists on the distinction between the living imagination and the mechanical fancy because it was a part of his all out war against the 'mechanico-corpuscular' theory on every front which was a characteristic of all the Romantic poets of the 19th century, who were against the materialism that science brought with it. He felt that "we have purchased a few brilliant inventions at the loss of all communion with life and the spirit of nature." (Colmer 17). According to Coleridge, the main contribution of 18th century thought had been to 'Understanding', or the exploration of the universe by means of intellect and the achievements of science. But there was, he believed, the faculty of 'Reason', which transcended 'Understanding.' It included spiritual experience in which the mechanical philosophy had been lacking. Thinkers like Descartes, Locke and others who belonged to their tradition had divided up the unity of human sensation and experience, resulting in the separation of God from his creation. "The loss of communion with nature was, for Coleridge, one of the most disastrous effects of this philosophy on men. For him faith was the highest of human faculties, and for this reason there was no need to justify the spiritual life by logic."(16). Though, he believed in the divine inspiration, he did not credit each and every part of the Bible with being the literal word of God. However, he had unshaken faith in its essential value as an achievement of the human spirit, and its unfailing response to those who sought in it a comfort or a guide.

While Coleridge sometimes rejected or qualified his beliefs about one or another of these theological approaches (for instance, he rejected pantheism because he thought it led to atheism), these streams of theology nevertheless flow through his writings, nourishing the imagination like the sacred river Alph in his famous poem, *Kubla Khan*.

According to Coleridge God constantly creates diverse aspects of life. And when we return to the source of all being that encompasses all beings-we become one with the infinite imagination of God. Infact, one cannot deny the fact that though many generations of readers enjoy his works for its brilliance and beauty, his insight into the divine imagination is his noblest gift of all. This is because his ideas on imagination and faith were very essential in the 19th century where there was a rapid erosion of faith due to idealization of material progress-, which is not very dissimilar to modern times. Therefore, his approaches are timeless and have outworn many controversies. All his thoughts on faith and the imagination are quintessentially captured in his poem ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and ‘Kubla Khan’.

A close analysis of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ reflects Coleridge’s ideas on faith and imagination. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner was published in the first edition of Lyrical Ballads (1798). It is the longest major poem that Coleridge wrote and it is generally speculated that the poem may have been inspired by James Cook’s second voyage of exploration (1772-1775) of the south seas and the Pacific Ocean. Coleridge's tutor, William Wales, was astronomer on the Cook’s flagship and had a strong relationship with Cook. Initially the poem received mixed reviews from critics, and Coleridge was once told by the publisher that most of the book's sales were to sailors who thought it was a naval songbook. Moreover, “what struck contemporary readers first was the strangeness of its style-its innovative and liberal use of obsolete words, archaic spellings, and sometimes archaic sentence constructions”. (Spencer110) Coleridge made several modifications to the poem over the years. In the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800), he replaced many of the archaic words. In 1817, in the ‘Sibylline Leaves’, he added the marginal glosses. Even those who have never read the Rime have come under its influence: its words have given the English language the metaphor of an albatross around one's neck, the (mis)quote of "water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink", and the phrase "a sadder but wiser man".

Analysis

Theme of the poem: There are critics who contend that ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is autobiographical in its strange, imaginative theme and storyline. Coleridge, even early in his writing, was haunted by remorse for his addiction to opium, which he had first taken to relieve pain as a patient at Christ's Hospital.

But whether or not the poem actually served as a catharsis for its author's guilt, it stands on its own merits. According to Kathleen Coburn and Patricia Adair, "The Old Navigator born in Coleridge's fertile imaginationproved in many ways to be a prophetic anticipation of his creator's own later experience of isolation and loneliness. In Coleridge's biography the years from 1800 onward were years of escalating personal suffering, deepening insecurity, and progressive estrangement from family and friends: ill health, opium addiction, the impairment of his poetic powers, marital incompatibility...- all were factors contributing to a growing sense of alienation and neurotic self-recrimination." (Spencer 114). From the above observation it may be inferred that perhaps, the poet did reflect the turbulences that happened in his personal life because after all the poet is also a product of his circumstances and his work will undeniably bear traces of what he had undergone in his life time.

According to John Spencer Hill, the poem was intended to be a joint ballad with Wordsworth and the germ of the work "recounted by Coleridge, was a strange dream of John Cruikshank (one of Coleridge's Stowey neighbours) in which a skeletal ship with figures in it had been a prominent- and suitably macabre-feature. Their central character (again Coleridge's contribution) was to be an Old Navigator.....,and they plotted how this old sailor should in his youth, have committed a crime which had brought spectral persecution upon him and doomed him, like Cain and the wandering Jew, to a life of eternal exile and wandering". (104) It was Wordsworth's suggestion that Coleridge should represent the sailor as having killed "one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary spirits take upon them to avenge the crime."(104) Thus the main theme of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is the story of the Romantic archetype, the Wanderer, the man with the mark of Cain, doomed to walk the earth alone and alienated from all others. What is presented to the reader is a theme of guilt and remorse, juxtaposed with the background joy of a wedding feast. The audience is unwilling, but is forced to hear the tale anyway. It seems that as a penance for what he has done, the Mariner is compelled to tell his story whenever the agony returns.

Moreover, Coleridge in this poem examines the comprehensive theme of the idea of crime and punishment. It can be summarized as follows: a man commits a crime; the crime sets in motion the machinery of justice and punishment; it also calls down a curse upon his head; the criminal suffers severe pangs of remorse; and finally through remorse he finds regeneration and salvation.

As we can observe in the poem, the albatross is a “pious bird of good omen”; and the mariner kills it for no reason. For the one sin of his pride and callousness in shooting the bird he suffers adventures and ‘spectral persecutions’ that set him apart from men forever. And he gains redemption only when he expresses remorse. Thus, this can also be called as the story of the redemption of the human soul. This poem also reflects the poet’s attitude to the natural world and is also a testament to his central faith: that God gives salvation to those who seek him and that nature is capable of influencing for good in even one of her insensitive children. Thus, the poem reflects this idea when the mariner, at the sight of the water snakes, blesses them and realizes that he is able to pray.

The Supernatural Elements in the Poem

Since Coleridge’s interests always lay with the exotic and the supernatural, he hoped to make it more real for his readers by employing simple, straightforward language in an archaic English ballad form. So, in this poem, he succeeds in making the extraordinary believable; and his graphic word-pictures - some fraught with horror, others piercing us with brief visions of exquisite beauty - evoke images so clear and deep that they touch every one of our senses and emotions. In the poem Coleridge personifies Death and Life-in-Death as playing a game of dice and finally death’s mate wins over the mariner. The following lines create an almost ghoulish effect, that it is rather preternatural when one reads the description of the harlot woman, who can curdle a man’s blood; is represented as the Nightmare-Life-in-Death

*“Are those her ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that woman's mate?
Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-Mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thickens man's blood with cold.” (185-194) (Coleridge193-194)*

The mariner also suggests that the supernatural forces were instrumental in propelling the ship ahead as there was no trace of a breeze. Moreover, the mariner goes on to observe that the dead men groaned, and the helmsman steered, the mariners began to work the ropes, like a ghastly crew. These images obviously suggest to the reader that an unearthly force is inducing such actions. Though, the reader is aware of the fact that he may never experience or witness such a sight in reality, Coleridge's untrammelled imagination succeeds in making the scene rise in front of one's eyes. Thus, the poet is able to create a state in the reader's mind that enhances his interest so that he finds a "semblance of truth" (Coleridge 5) which is "sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief which for the moment constitutes poetic faith." (6).

It is worth noticing that Coleridge omits the Gothic figure of death and concentrates the terror in the unconventional figure of Life-in-Death. The purpose is to move closer toward his object of employing supernatural elements as symbols of those frightening, gory and dark aspects of our 'inward nature' that haunt the peripheries of our rational consciousness. (BLVol. II 6). Although spectral encounters are the common fare of Gothic horror-ballads and romance, the phantoms and demons that the mariner encounters are projections from the unconscious depths of his own troubled mind. "In other words Coleridge was to employ the supernatural as an expressive medium or symbol for 'romantic emotional states (fear, guilt, remorse, etc.) and to imitate these states with such psychological fidelity and dramatic force that the reader.....would momentarily recognize truths of his own inner being in the fictional incidents or characters represented."(Spencer 129)

Thus the symbolic significance of the supernatural element is to directly evoke the emotions "of a guilty man's spiritual voyage of self-discovery through the unseen moral universe that lies within and above us." (129)

Coleridge not only employs preternatural elements of horror, but he also uses cherubic images that represent the divine like:

*"A man all light, a seraph-man,
On every corpse there stood.
This seraph band, each waved his hand:
It was a heavenly sight!
They stood as signals to the land,
Each one a lovely light:"* (lines 490-495).

This suggests that the ‘seraph’ man who holds the highest rank among angels was standing next to each corpse ready to take the souls of the dead men to heaven. Though, the mariner was in a trance when he happens to see this sight (it was a dream) still this suggests the Christian belief that there is life after death and God sends his messengers, the cherubic angels to take guard of hiscreation.

Religious Elements

Many critics contend as discussed earlier that the theme of the ballad itself is Christian, based on the story of Cain’s years of guilty wandering after the murder of his brother Abel. Therefore, it is obvious that it has more than an accidental relation to the theme of the journey through crime, punishment and expiation suffered by the mariner. The mariner gives a direct reference to the albatross as being hung across his neck like a cross in the lines below:

*“Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.” (lines 141-142).*

Here, he refers to the practice among Jews to make a sinner carry a cross- followed by his crucifixion, similar to what was executed in the life of Jesus Christ. He suggests that he has been considered guilty by his crew members and therefore is made to bear the albatross, which takes the place of a cross and serves as a symbol of insult and humiliation.

Once again, in a slightly paradoxical sense, the poetry focuses on an idea of 'religion in nature', a view held by many Romantic poets, notably Wordsworth. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner takes many religious images and 'naturalises' them. In part, the third, the mariner says:

*“I beheld
A something in the sky”, (lines 147-148),(Coleridge 192)*

which has subtle connotations of the star the three wise men followed. However, the “something” is in fact an albatross and like the star in the bible story the albatross is a key symbol in the ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.

“LIFE-IN-DEATH” and “DEATH” “were casting dice” for the souls of the crew and once again this mirrors with a natural or arguably supernatural twist the soldiers who dined for Jesus’ clothes after his death on the cross. In addition to this the lines:

*“The man hath penance done,
And penance more will do,” (lines 408-409),(Coleridge 202)*

Conveys the Christian belief of retribution and penance for one’s sins. Apart from this there are other elements like the seraph man, the heaven’s mother and Mary Queen all of which convey the mariner’s faith in God, who, finally, yet partially grants his forgiveness.

Imagery and the use of paradox:

The paradoxical statement by the ‘ancient mariner’ that there is “*water, water everywhere,..... nor any drop to drink*”(lines 119-122)(Coleridge 191) adds to the sense of a paradoxical natural world and the “beauty and the happiness” of the “slimy things” the mariner notices whilst at sea creates a similar paradoxical image. The inclusion of the word agony to describe the soul of the mariner is once again paradoxical as the word can mean both mental anguish and pleasure. This double meaning in describing the “soul” of the mariner symbolizes the fact that the balance in nature is at the heart of the natural world as the soul is an important part of the mariner.

Through his use of equally balanced contrasts, both in terms of imagery and style, he is able to suggest a natural world that although often conflicting is always in perfect equilibrium. Similarly, the Ancient Mariner reflects his timelessness through the regularity of the way in which he tells his story. The use of the word ‘ancient’ consolidates this idea of eternity as it is a word usually used for inanimate and often only natural subjects, as does the vastness of the ocean he is marooned on. Furthermore his attention to detail in his story suggests he has told it many times and detailed observation such as his description of the ship,

*“at first it seemed a little speck,
And then it seemed to mist (lines 140-150),(Coleridge 192)*

Helps us realize this is just not one story about the nemesis of the natural world being told at one precise moment in time but a timeless story of nature and the natural world.

Furthermore, the Mariner's unkempt yet charismatic appearance suggested to the reader through a repeated focus on his “glittering”, “bright” eyes and his appearance as a “greybeard loon” and particularly his “long grey beard”, suggests subtly that he has become a ‘spokesman for nature.’ The Mariner's timelessness in direct contrast to the deaths of all the other crew members helps suggest the eternity of nature he has become symbolic of.

The poem is very vivid, as the poet describes some spectacular scenes. These are often memorable in themselves but also symbolize other things, for the people in the poem, as well as the reader at times. There are numerous comparisons made to describe things, by means of similes, as when the becalmed vessel is said to be:

*“As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean”, (lines 117&118), (Coleridge 191)*

suggesting the sudden state of inertia in which the ship as well as crew on the ship had to experience, due to the wrath of nature which denied them the much needed wind to propel them forward, thus they were helpless and idle as a painted ship and the view was almost like that of an inanimate painting.

There is also an interesting comparison that can be made to the bride and the woman who is represented as LIFE-IN-DEATH. In the first instance the poet says:

*“The bride hath paced into the hall,
Red as a rose is she;” (lines 33 & 34)(Coleridge 188)*

This simile is employed to compare the bride to a red rose, referring to the fact that she was either blushing red, as she is a bride who is about to tie the nuptial knot or maybe to suggest that she was beautiful as a red rose or to suggest that she was full of love for her groom, as a red rose also is given to a loved one as a token of one’s love.

However, in line 190, Coleridge uses the same adjective 'red' to describe the colour of the lips of Death's mate or the woman who is portrayed as LIFE-IN-DEATH: "*Her lips were red, her looks were free*".

(Coleridge 194). In this line the manner in which the poet describes the woman seems to connote a ghastly hideous image of a loose woman seeking blood with her 'red lips' and 'free looks'.

In this context John Cornwall says: "The horrid figure of Death's Mate is a mockery of the bride at the wedding feast-'red as a rose is she'-her skin as white as leprosy', and the suggestion of the sterility and disease of the whore who brings death in life offers a sharp and dualistic contrast to the Virgin Mary on whom the Mariner calls in vain for life and grace". (Cornwall 240)

Coleridge also employs a very intriguing simile in the following lines when the mariner describes his dread while he watches the game of dice for his life and that of the crew;

*"Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
My life-blood seemed to sip!"* (lines 204-205). (Coleridge 195)

Here, he says that the fear at his heart was consuming his blood as if it were drinking from a cup. The reference to the cup could have "a sacramental and sacrificial suggestion of the chalice reinforcing the baptismal significance of cleansing and quenching in the forming of the dew on the sails".²

There are many other similes, which abound in the poem like the following:

*"And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my CROSS-BOW!"* (lines 222-223) (Coleridge 196)

which suggests that the souls of the dead men fled from their bodies with the speed of the arrow which killed the albatross, and in (lines 225-227),

*"And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribbed sea-sand",* (196)

²Cornwall, John, *Coleridge, Poet and Revolutionary, A Critical Biography*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books Limited, pg.no.241.

shows that the wedding guest is terrified looking at the long, lanky, bony hands of the mariner which looks like the striated sea-sand suggesting that after having witnessed such spectral persecutions, the mariner himself had taken on the skeletal appearance of death. Again in *lines 249-251*:

*“And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye,”*(197)

a simile is used to express how weary and burdened the mariner felt as he was isolated and lonely with no human company that the very nature seemed to burden his life as there was nothing above except for the infinite sky and nothing below other than vast stretches of hard water. In Part V of the ballad, the rain sent by the Holy Mother refreshes the mariner and the whole scene is animated with a roaring wind, *“And the sails did sigh like sedge;”* (line 319) (199)

suggesting now that they will once again be driven at great speed like across the ocean, and the sails were sighing like the sedge which is a wet water plant, in relief that now they can embark on their journey as there were ample signals with the pouring rain and roaring wind and with the moon at its edge that the conditions were conducive for their voyage.

Use of Symbolism in the poem:

Symbols are very crucial in this poem. Without the symbols, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'; would be simply a poem about an old mariner who is telling a story about killing a bird to a guest at a wedding. Of course, anyone who reads the poem can see that there is more to it than just a simple telling of a story.

The first symbol in the poem is the wedding that the guest and the Mariner are at. This is a highly significant detail, because Coleridge could have made the story telling take place at any setting, but he chooses a wedding, perhaps, because a wedding is a very religious, solemn and a very happy occasion. Weddings in and of themselves symbolize new beginnings and happiness. The reason that Coleridge decided to have this horrid tale told at a wedding could be for any number of reasons. It could be because such a setting would imply new beginnings.

As the Mariner tells his tale, the guest is held captive and when the story is done, the guest becomes essentially a new man and goes off to live the rest of his life. Had the tale taken place at a funeral, the heavy feeling of ending would have destroyed the symbolism of new beginnings; termination of life, of joys, and of everything conceivable.

If this had happened, then the fact that he rose the next day would not have been as significant. Therefore, the wedding is a very important symbol in this poem.

Coleridge is such a seminal writer that the symbols he uses can be at times difficult to decipher or can carry several interpretations. Infact his use of symbolism lends the work to adults as a complex web of representation, rather than a children's book about a sailor. One plausible interpretation could be that, the Ancient Mariner—who is at once himself, Coleridge and all humanity—having sinned, both incurs punishment and seeks redemption; or, in other words, becomes anxiously aware of his relation to the God of Justice (as symbolized by the Sun), and in his sub-consciousness earnestly pleads the forgiveness of the God of Love (represented by the Moon-symbol). One can say that the Sun along with the Polar Spirit and the First Voice is conceived in Coleridge's imagination as suggesting the stern, just, wrathful, punitive side of the nature of God who is exacting and very similar to the God of the Old Testament, i.e God the Father, who burnt the cities of Sodom and Gomarrah with fire, the divine master who spurned away Adam and Eve from paradise for their disobedience, and of course the vindictive God who persecuted Cain,(the most guilty figure in history) with the ghost of his brother Abel for having murdered him.

And that the Moon along with the Hermit and the Second Voice symbolizes the gentle, loving and compassionate, redemptive aspect like that of God the son, Jesus Christ, who even while dying on the cross asked his Father to forgive his crucifiers as they little realized what they were doing. The whole ballad presents a tale of sin and salvation, of crime and compassion, of the operation of inflexible Justice and the intervention of inexhaustible Love.

In the poem itself it will be noticed that there are many references to the Sun and to the Moon, and that these are the chief recurrent symbols. Initially, in the descriptions of the Sun he appears first as the ship drives southward across the Equator—the Sun coming up upon the left, shining bright, and setting on the right .The next reference is more significant. After the wanton slaughter of the Albatross,

*“Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,
The glorious Sun uprist.” (lines 97-98)(190)*

The majesty of the Divine slowly and steadily reveals itself until the Sun has climbed to the meridian. Then there appears one of the most impressively symbolic stanzas in the poem:

*“All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.” (lines 111-114) (190)*

The avenging process has begun; the ship is suddenly becalmed; the Polar Spirit plagues the sailors; the dead Albatross is hung about the Mariner's neck; weary and menacing days dawn and pass away; the crew are suffering from drought and fear; when at last the phantom vessel is spotted:

*“See! See! (I cried) she tacks no more!
Hither to work us weal, -
Without a breeze, without a tide,
She steadies with upright keel!
The western wave was all aflame,
The day was well nigh done!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright sun;
When that strange shape drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the Sun.
And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)
As if through a dungeon-grate he peered
With broad and burning face.
Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)
How fast she nears and nears!
Are those her sails that glance in the Sun,
Like restless gossameres?”*

*Are those her ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a Death? and are there two?
Is Death that woman's mate?" (lines 167-189)(193)*

Guilt and Fear have interposed themselves between God and the sinful Mariner and his mates, who find themselves now wholly in the power of Death and of Life-in-Death. The crew becomes the prey of Death, while the Mariner falls to the lot of Life-in-Death. She whistles thrice, and it is a sinister signal that the sense of the Divine presence is wholly lost:

*"The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:
At one stride comes the dark;
With far-beard whisper o'er the sea,
Off shot the spectre-bark." (lines 199-202)(195)*

One after one, under "the star-dogged Moon"- distorted symbol, for the moment, suggesting perhaps an alienated Love- the sailors perish, and the Mariner is abandoned to the horror of utter separation from his Creator. By his own act he has become a castaway. No saint takes pity on his soul in agony. He tries to pray and only a wicked whisper emanates.

Divorced altogether from hope or help, for seven days and seven nights he watches the curse in the dead men's eyes, and yet, like the Wandering Jew, he himself cannot die. As he declares to the Wedding- Guest in Part VII:

*"O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
Alone on a wide, wide sea:
So, lonely 'twas, that God himself
Scarce seemed there to be." (lines 597-600)(208)*

All is fixed and stagnant, as though forever. Suddenly in that static horror something apparently moves,-the only moving, hope-renewing object within that wilderness of sea and sky.

It is the normal, familiar Moon-symbol, as we have seen, of the inexhaustible loving-kindness of God. No contrast could be greater than that between the miseries of the Mariner in his ominous surroundings and gentle rising of the friendly Moon. But it is hard to find in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ more beautiful lines than the following, especially as related to their context:

*“The moving Moon went up the sky,
And nowhere did abide:
Softly she was going up, And a star or two beside” - (lines 263-267)(197)*
The word ‘softly’ reappears when the poet describes the Second Voice:
*“The other was a softer voice,
As soft as honey-dew:” (lines 406 & 407).(202)*
*“But tell me, tell me! speak again,
Thy soft response renewing” (lines 410-411)(202)*
The moonbeams, says Coleridge,
*“... bemocked the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread!
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,
The charmed water burnt alway
A still and awful red. (lines 267-271) (197)*

That is, all is now bathed in moonlight save the shadow of the ship. The Mariner looks beyond the shadow, and for the first time sees from the point of view of the God of Love those sea- creatures whom he had previously despised and condemned as “a thousand slimy things.” Beheld in this moonlight aspect, they reveal great grace and charm:

*“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.” (lines 282-287)(198)*

Seen thus from the higher point of view, the Mariner sees them thus thereafter, even within the shadow of the ship.

“The spell,” says the gloss, “begins to break.” “Corresponding to the sight of the water-snakes comes soon afterwards, in Part V, another change. The souls of the Mariner's companions “that fled in pain” are replaced by “a troop of spirits blest.” The sounds of their singing are sustained with an exquisite sweetness, and they renew that sweetness by darting to their source in the Sun. But there is another spirit who does not sing. “The lonesome Spirit from the south-pole,” says the gloss, “carries on the ship as far as the Line, in obedience to the angelic troop, but still requireth vengeance.” The Polar Spirit and the Sun are at one in this, for, as the poet immediately declares:

*“The Sun, right up above the mast,
Had fixed her to the ocean:
But in a minute she 'gan stir,
With a short uneasy motion-
Backwards and forwards half her length
With a short uneasy motion.
Then like a pawing horse let go,
She made a sudden bound:
It flung the blood into my head,
And I fell down in a swoond.
How long in that same fit I lay,
I have not to declare;
But ere my living life returned,
I heard, and in my soul discerned,
Two voices in the air.” (lines 382-397) (201)*

Thus, the two voices, simply vary the symbols of Law and of Love, of Retribution and of Redemption. The First Voice relates the story of the crime and takes part in his wrongs, The Second Voice pleads gently that the Mariner

*“bath penance done,
And penance more will do.” (lines 408 & 409). (202)*

The Second Voice also reveals the power of the prime corresponding symbol, the Moon:

*“Still as a slave before his lord,
The ocean bath no blast;
His great bright eye most silently*

*Up to the Moon is cast-
If he may know which way to go;
For she guides him smooth or grim.
See, brother, see! how graciously
She looketh down on him.” (lines 415-421) (202)*

The voices fade away; the Mariner awakens; the Moon is high; the dead men stand on deck with that eerie punitive glitter in their eyes, the spell of which the Mariner, even when redeemed, can never wholly forget.

But for the moment the spell is snapped, and the Mariner views the ocean, no longer as slimy, or rotting, or painted, but as fresh and clear and green. "The curse," says the gloss, "is finally expiated." The two motives of Retribution and Redemption are drawing together and a great wind bears the ship towards her haven.

*“It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
Like a meadow-gale of spring
Dread expresses itself in the next line:
It mingled strangely with my fears,
and hope in the fourth line:
Yet it felt like a welcoming.” (lines 456-459)(204)*

The almost magical manner in which the poet combines these opposing motives here and in the next stanza deserves special attention. Dread appears in:

*“Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship,
and hope in the reappearance of the familiar reassuring word softly,
Yet she sailed softly too.
Hope is suggested in the line:
Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze-
But lingering dread lifts itself again in the sad reflection:
On me alone it blew.” (lines 460-463)(204)*

The Mariner prays that his incredible homecoming may not be as the vision of a dream. “He beholdeth,” says the gloss, “his native country.” And he loves it as never before, not only for the welcoming that its familiar landmarks offer his heart, but also because the Moon still accompanies him, steeping in calm and silentness the bay, the rock, the kirk, the steady weathercock.

He had not heeded the white moonshine that glimmered through night and fog when he slew the Albatross; but now he knows the meaning of the Moon-the eternal Love of God-and he turns to the Hermit for confession and absolution. Confession made, he is duly shriven, but says Coleridge in the gloss, with penetrating intention: "The penance of life falls on him. And ever throughout his future life an agony compels him to travel from land to land.

And to teach by his own example love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth."(208-209)

It should be added, in conclusion, though Coleridge could not achieve as much as he wished to, due to his circumstances he is nevertheless an important structural support to the Romantic Movement. His emphasis on the imagination, its independence from the outside world and its creation of fantastic images such as those found in the 'Rime,' exerted a profound influence on later writers such as Shelley; his depiction of feelings of alienation and numbness helped to define more sharply the Romantics' idealized contrast between the emptiness of the city--where such feelings are experienced--and the joys of nature. The heightened understanding of these feelings also helped to shape the stereotype of the suffering Romantic genius, often further characterized by drug addiction: this figure of the idealist, brilliant yet tragically unable to attain his own ideals, is a major pose for Coleridge in his poetry which many critics contend he has expressed in his poem Kubla Khan.

The mind, to Coleridge, cannot take its feeling from nature and cannot falsely imbue nature with its own feeling; rather, the mind must be so filled with its own joy that it opens up to the real, independent, immortal joy of nature.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study has been to lead us back from the work to its genesis in the author's experience, the philosophic or religious ideas it embodies and the cultural, moral, social effects and historical trends, which had influenced the writer as, reflected in his or her literary work. The above analysis reflects the fact that Coleridge affirmed that the imagination was the means of reaching truth through creativity and therefore he viewed a human being as endowed with infinite aspiration towards the limitless good envisioned by the faculty of imagination.

Throughout ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ there is an interplay of faith and imagination as Coleridge symbolically introduces the omnipotent presence of God through the supernatural elements in the poem and the its recurrent theme of crime and punishment. His influence was felt as an upholder of the spiritual view of the world in an age of increasing materialism and unbelief.

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