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“Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink”: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale

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"Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink": *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale

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Abstract

Through an ecocritical perspective, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has been shown to delineate the relationship between man and nature, including the disastrous effects of the Mariner's killing of the Albatross. The conversation should extend to the poem's function as ecological allegory and cautionary tale, revealing what happens when man's devastation kills nature and, ultimately, destroys himself. As such, the Mariner and his men can be seen as representative of humankind, the killing of the Albatross as humanity's destruction of the planet, and the Wedding-Guest as future generations who must suffer the consequences of the actions of those who came before. This paper examines the allegorical links between *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and recent environmental studies because Coleridge's words are now more important than ever. If the destruction of our planet does not come to a halt, many of the one million species facing extinction will be pushed over the brink; the consequences of this tremendous loss in biodiversity will be far-reaching, contributing to a global scarcity of clean water. This paper also examines the discourse regarding the rhetorical effectiveness of the famous lines that end the Mariner's tale, concluding that if we heed Coleridge's warning and take the Mariner's experiences and resulting moral to heart, we can save the planet, and we can save ourselves.

Keywords: Coleridge, Ecocriticism, Romanticism, Ecological Allegory, Environmental Studies, Ecopoetics, Global Warming, Biodiversity

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The most significant relationship humankind participates in is the relationship with the natural world. After all, the planet provides us with the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the paper on which we print our beloved texts. This year, on April 22, 2020, people from around the globe celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, though to call it a celebration is a stretch. What this day has come to symbolize does not involve cheers and festivity. Instead, it serves as a sobering reminder that humanity's most beneficial relationship is not *mutually* beneficial; the relentless devastation of the planet makes this clear. Through the Mariner's callous killing of the Albatross and the calamity that follows, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* demonstrates the disastrous effects of humanity's dominion. As such, it serves as a cautionary tale, showing readers what happens when the natural world is abused, as well as a confirmation that humans should work to live in harmony with nature—which is the only way both members of this relationship can survive.

The superiority of man over all other animals is a belief that is as injurious as it is popular, and the Mariner exemplifies this belief when he kills the Albatross. This senseless killing is the catalyst of immense agony for the Mariner, signaling the start of his downfall and causing the curse upon his soul. It is surprising, then, that in Coleridge's longest poem, only one and a half lines are used to describe it: "…With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross" (81-82). This is a very direct and puzzling statement, and it yields no explanation. While there is a brief mention of fog, indicating that the Mariner could have associated the bird with overcast conditions at sea, the excuse is flimsy at best. Perhaps this is because there could be no

justification for actions that lead to such devastating consequences. By ending the life of an innocent creature, the Mariner brings about the ruin of not only himself but his companions as well, demonstrating the profound connection between humankind and the natural world. The terseness of the Mariner's confession could also be the result of the murderer's lack of premeditation. Literary critic Harold Bloom calls the killing of the Albatross an example of "motiveless malevolence," considering the possibility that it may not have been a conscious decision on the part of the Mariner (208). The Mariner does not seem to desire ending the Albatross's life; in fact, he comes across as thoughtless, careless, even oblivious of his own actions. Instead of showing animosity toward the Albatross, the Mariner's primary emotion during the murder seems to be that of apathy.

Just as the Mariner killed the Albatross, humanity is killing planet Earth, a crime that also appears to stem from the perpetrator's reckless oblivion. The developed world has consistently harmed the environment to provide for an ever-increasing population. Animal agriculture, pollution, deforestation, and the overexploitation of natural resources are proving detrimental to the planet and to all who reside upon it, including humankind. This occurs not only in a collective sense, but on an individual level as well. We have become so detached from the natural world that it is easy to forget the suffering we contribute to as we go about our day-to-day lives. But the ramifications are making themselves known, and they are no longer going completely overlooked. Last year, the United Nations performed a global environmental assessment, "the first ever carried out by an intergovernmental body" (Díaz et al. 2). Their findings revealed that, unless the destruction of the planet comes to a grinding halt, many of the one million species facing extinction will be pushed over the brink in the next thirty years. Not only is the rate of species extinction across the globe currently "at least tens to hundreds of times

higher" than the average has been over the past ten million years, but it is accelerating, causing the destruction of many of Earth's ecosystems (24). These ecosystems provide us with natural resources that are crucial for the health of the human species, such as medicines, a wide variety of nutritious foods, and clean drinking water. Because these resources depend on healthy ecosystems, and because ecosystems require biodiversity to thrive, preserving nature and other animal species means preserving the human species. Correspondingly, diminished biodiversity due to the destruction of Earth's ecosystems "thus threatens a good quality of life" for us all (22). While this is not the first time the catastrophic effects of humanity's mistreatment of the planet have been studied, *The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* has proved that the fate of humankind is bound to the fate of the planet and that both are in grave and imminent danger.

While it is the Mariner alone who kills the Albatross, his shipmates are not entirely innocent. At first, they adore the seabird and consider its presence a positive omen. As Bloom writes, "[t]hey hail it in God's name as if it were human; they domesticate it with their food, which it has never eaten before; they play with it as if it were child or pet" (207). The Mariner also adored the bird, but then, without warning, he murders the innocent animal and violates his relationship with the natural world in the process. The sudden switch from adoration to slaughter makes his actions even more reprehensible. When learning of the murder, the Mariner's shipmates become angry and cry out against him, calling him a wretch. However, after the fog clears and the "glorious Sun" returns, they attempt to justify the Mariner's actions, saying it must have been the Albatross that "brought the fog and mist" (Coleridge 98-100). Even though they did not actively take part in killing the bird, they still become complicit in the crime; because they have seemingly benefited from the cruelty, they condone it, forgetting how much they once

loved the Albatross and losing sight of their own morality. They have severed the link between themselves and the natural world and made themselves accomplices in the murder, which has doomed them to a terrible death. Coleridge shows that this is what happens when we turn a blind eye to crimes against nature. The ramifications will affect everyone.

Though the fog has cleared, and a fair breeze has arrived in its place to ensure smooth sailing for the Mariner and his shipmates, it is not long before their vessel becomes "As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean" (117-18). The men grow increasingly dehydrated while trapped on the sea without tide. As the Mariner laments these dire circumstances, it becomes apparent that they are a consequence of his causing the Albatross to suffer and die. The Albatross can be seen as a feminine aspect of nature, for the Mariner calls it a "sweet bird" and associates it with the moon, a symbol of feminine energy (88). Speaking of the seabird, the Mariner says it escorted his ship "Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white, / Glimmered the white moon-shine" (77-78). The sun is never mentioned during the Albatross's time with the Mariner and his men, only the moon, which is later personified as female when the Mariner notes how "Softly she was going up" as she "went up the sky" (263-65). If the Albatross is presented as representative of femininity, as an aspect of Mother Nature herself, then the Mariner *killed the mother*, which is a shocking reversal of the Oedipal complex. The punishment fits the crime, for though the Mariner and his men are surrounded by water, it is saltwater and therefore not suitable for human consumption. Unable to consume Mother Nature's life-sustaining liquid, they are rendered parched, withered, and mute, and the misery they endure as a result spurs the Mariner's most famous lines: "Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink" (121-22). The Mariner becomes so desperate to remedy his desiccation that he bites into his own arm to

drink the blood that flows from the wound, showing that destruction of the natural world, of Mother Nature, leads to destruction of self.

Like the Mariner, we are at risk of losing our symbiotic relationship with the Earth mother, for the possibility of a global scarcity of clean water is on the horizon. While the UN's report does say that clean water could be engineered in man-made facilities, it makes sure to underscore the fact that the infrastructure would be not only difficult but expensive to build and maintain, and it would "fail to provide synergistic benefits" associated with healthy ecosystems, such as access to diverse food sources (Díaz et al. 22). Though, for now, humanity might be sailing smoothly, it is only a matter of time before "the sails drop[] down," and we too will be threatened with a lack of drinkable water (Coleridge 107). To avoid this, we must achieve sustainability in our relations with the natural world. The UN has revealed that this goal "cannot be met by current trajectories," acknowledging that success in this regard will require "transformative changes across economic, social, political and technological factors" (Díaz et al. 33). These changes must be made in consideration of the impacts of climate change, which Earth Day organizers call "the biggest challenge to the future of humanity and the life-support systems that make our world habitable" (Earth). Climate models show that the best results would be attained by "limiting human-induced climate change to well below 2°C," which would depend on "immediate, rapid reductions in greenhouse gas emissions or a reliance on substantial carbon dioxide removal from the atmosphere" (Díaz et al. 37). If these changes are not made, mankind's misery could be as great as that depicted in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

When the Mariner drinks his own blood, he is able to verbally acknowledge the spectral ship that is fast approaching, eventually coming "Betwixt" his vessel "and the Sun" (Coleridge 176). Aboard this ship is Life-in-Death, who plays a game of dice with Death for the Mariner's

soul and wins, after which the Mariner's shipmates drop dead, rendering him "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!" (232-33). He learns, however, that he is not entirely alone, for his relationship with the sea snakes moving alongside his ship transforms. Earlier in the poem, he mentions "slimy things" moving in the ocean, and it is clear that he does not see these creatures in a positive light (125). However, after his fellow seafarers perish, he reconsiders these slimy things, noting that "a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did [he]" (238-39). In this moment, he starts to align with the water snakes, realizing the connection that exists between these creatures and himself. Soon after, when he sees them swimming alongside his ship again, he calls them "happy living things" as a gushing "spring of love" overflows from his heart (282-84). He has finally seen their beauty and subsequently blesses them, after which the Albatross falls from his neck, effectively breaking his curse. Of this incident, Bloom writes that the Mariner is saved by "naturalizing himself in his surroundings and finding a joy that will intimate the one life he shares with the creatures of the great deep" (210).

The Mariner's experiences culminate in a moral regarding man and nature. "He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small," the Mariner imparts, "For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all" (Coleridge 614-17). The emphasis on prayer reflects one of the most harrowing symptoms the Mariner experienced while he was cursed: the inability to pray. With his dead shipmates all around him, the Mariner looked up toward the heavens in an attempt to commune with God; however, naught but a "wicked whisper" fell from his lips, signifying that his severed relationship with the natural world led him to be cut off from the divine (246). The strong link between nature and God that is revealed here is evident in a number of Coleridge's writings, some of which involve the pantheistic sentiment that nature *is* God. For example, in "The Eolian Harp," which precedes *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by two years,

Coleridge basks in the "Serenely brilliant" (8) surroundings outside his cottage, calling nature the "tranquil muse" of "many idle flitting phantasies" that traverse throughout his "passive brain" (38-41). One such flitting phantasy is the notion that "all of animated nature" could be eolian harps "trembl[ing] into thought" as "one intellectual breeze" sweeps over them (44-47). This shared breeze represents the immense interconnection that exists between humanity and natural world, the same interconnection the Mariner realizes when he aligns himself with the sea snakes. In "The Eolian Harp," Coleridge goes on to wonder if this breeze could be the "Soul of each, and God of All" before contemplating his wife's religious beliefs and confessing his devotion to Christ (48). Even though he seemingly renounces his pantheistic outpouring, the association between God and nature persists in Coleridge's writings, for the Mariner's connection to sublimity is restored only when he loves and blesses the water snakes, and the moral emphasizes this bond.

The rhetorical effectiveness of the Mariner's moral has been the subject of much critical discourse. Bloom, for example, writes that though the Mariner "has seen the truth…the truth does not set him free" (211). Instead of viewing the final lines of the Mariner's tale as profound revelation, Bloom regards them as nothing more than an overt simplification of the Mariner's experiences. The Mariner did not consciously bless the sea snakes; it happened instinctually, which could mean that he did not fully grasp the totality of the experience and has fallen prey to parroting what little he did understand. In this way, the moral is reduced to a rudimentary script that the Mariner is doomed to endlessly repeat, a hallmark of "mere fundamentalis[m]" (Bloom 211). Coleridge scholar John Linvingston Lowes dismisses the moral entirely, designating *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as nothing more than pure fantasy and considering any attempt to derive a meaningful lesson from the Mariner's tale to be a foolish endeavor. To Lowes,

interpreting the poem "as didactic in its intention is to stultify both Coleridge and one's self" because it disregards the poet's motive in creating the work, which was solely to create something fanciful (274). His argument is supported by Coleridge's own words. In response to poet Anna Barbauld's critique that the poem lacked a moral, Coleridge counters that it actually "had too much" moral and that its only real fault was "the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination" (qtd. in Lowes 276).

However, critic Pyeaam Abbasi points to evidence in Coleridge's writings that shows the Mariner's moral involves sentiments the poet had himself. Three years before writing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge wrote a poem called *Religious Musings*, in which he outlines his faith. In this poem, Coleridge writes that God, "with no partial gaze / Views all creation; and he loves it all" (qtd. in Abbasi 9). It is clear that the moral in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is inspired by Coleridge's own beliefs, which lends greater credibility to its message. So, then, it appears that Coleridge believed in the moral the Mariner proclaims but later rescinded his endorsement. This drastic change was also present in "The Eolian Harp," where all it took was a stanza break to alter Coleridge's sentiments of the sublime. To dismiss the moral and overall lesson of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* solely because Coleridge later said the poem was nothing more than pure imagination is to reject the bulk of "The Eolian Harp" in favor of the final stanza, a mere sixteen-line profession of Christian faith. Instead, it is important to consider the significance of it all, to consider that Coleridge grappled with varying and even conflicting notions of divinity, which often made their way into his writings. Though he tended to go back and forth on the specifics of his beliefs, one thing remains clear: the link between nature and God is, to Coleridge, as strong as the link between nature and man. It is all connected. In the same

way, while the moral serves as a distillation of the Mariner's sentiments, it requires a connection to the rest of the poem, for the Mariner's experiences strengthen the impact of its message. Regardless of whether or not critics such as Lowes renounce the lesson the poem provides, and despite Coleridge's eventual dismissal of its didactic purpose, the moral of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has value if there are those who are moved by it.

The Wedding-Guest is moved. The frame of the poem involves the Mariner's telling of his experiences at sea to this man, who is at first held against his will by the Mariner's "glittering eye" and forced to listen to the harrowing tale (Coleridge 13). In time, however, he becomes an active participant in the encounter, interjecting his thoughts and questions into the Mariner's recount. While the Mariner possesses a "strange power of speech," it is the Wedding-Guest who causes the message to resonate because he truly listens (587). The very end of the poem is centered around this listener, who has become a "sadder and a wiser man" as a result of the encounter, which emphasizes his vital role in their interaction (624). Additionally, if the Mariner can be seen as mankind that is currently heading toward destruction, then the Wedding-Guest could represent future generations who must endure the same fate. After all, the Mariner is described as being one "Whose beard with age is hoar" (619), while the Wedding-Guest is compared to a "three years' child" (15). Learning of the killing of the planet at the hands of previous generations would be devastating. Just thinking of this conversation taking place is heartbreaking, which reinforces the notion that we must cherish and protect the planet, not only for ourselves, but also for our children, for our grandchildren, and for the future of the human species.

Even though the curse has been broken, the Mariner still lives a horrible existence. Doomed to "pass, like night, from land to land," he feels immense sorrow burning within his

heart, only experiencing temporary reprieve when he tells his "ghastly tale" (584-86). This continuing agony shows that even though the Mariner has seen the error of his ways, his "life remains a failure" (Abbasi 13). While he understands he was wrong to kill the Albatross and now sees the great connection between himself and all living beings, he cannot undo what he has done; just as the Albatross cannot come back to life, "the violation cannot be fully recovered" (Abbasi 13). In this way, Coleridge's Mariner serves as a harbinger of what is in store for us if we do not change course. If humanity continues on the path of destruction, depleting Earth of its natural resources until the planet is eventually annihilated, the consequences of this cannot be overturned simply because the errors have been recognized. One day, it will be too late, and no understanding of the wrongs committed will change the fact that humanity has sealed its own fate and signaled the end of its own existence.

We are not there yet, however. There is still time for us to fully recognize the damage we have inflicted upon the natural world. We have but one home, one Earth, one partner in this most crucial of all relationships. As *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* shows, humanity plays a critical role in the success or failure of this union. Instead of continually taking from the planet, we should strive to give back in return, and not just on one day of the year. We should invest in this relationship every day, ceaselessly working to right past wrongs. The UN's *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* offers guidelines on how to make these reparations by outlining "the actions that can still be taken to ensure a better future for all" (Díaz et al. 2). This is not just about ensuring the survival of the human species; it is about preserving "All things both great and small" (Coleridge 615). Repairing humanity's relationship with nature will require transformative, global implementations that will reframe the ways in which we interact with the planet, such as enforcing stricter measures on pollution, ensuring the sustainable

production of food, and improving animal welfare. Ultimately, the successful adoption of these measures will depend on humanity's acceptance of them, made more likely through an "[i]ncreasing awareness of interconnectedness in the context of the environmental crisis" (Díaz et al. 39). Though written over two hundred years ago, Coleridge's poem can aid us in this regard. But the message is only as powerful as its impact on the listener, just as the UN's guidelines are only helpful if humanity actually follows them.

While it was too late for the Mariner, it is not too late for us. Our crossbow is loaded and aimed at the Albatross, but we have not yet let the bolt fly. What will it take for us to lower our weapon in favor of preserving the planet? There would have to be a paradigm shift in the way that we view and relate to the natural world, but the message must resonate in order to incite this change. Instead of saving the role of the Wedding-Guest for our children and grandchildren, for the innumerable souls who will walk this earth long after we have taken our final breaths, perhaps we should strive to be active listeners right now, opening our minds and our hearts to uncomfortable truths. With minds and hearts open, we would be able to recognize the powerful connection that exists between ourselves and nature, which would inspire us to act accordingly. In doing so, not only would we redeem ourselves, but we would prevent the suffering of countless creatures and generations to come. This may require some sacrifice, but we humans are an adaptable species, and we can weather the changes and even challenges that a harmonious relationship with the natural world will entail. It is time for man's dominion to come to an end. We can do this. We *must* do this. It could save the world.

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