

An Analytic Study of the Symbolic Mariner and His Imaginative Voyage

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Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the most symbolic of all Romantic poets. Through his creative imagination, Coleridge creates symbols that disguise the philosophical ideas, and something fresh and unsullied out of the chaos of different images and associations. It is simply imagination that enables the romantic poet to present spiritually perceived things, and resolves his conflict by returning to "dynamic organicism." In Coleridge's masterpiece entitled *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the emphasis is placed on "negative romanticism" or the poet's "period of doubt and despair" when he fails to perceive the truth, imaginatively. In isolation and with the help of imagination, the poet sees the benevolence of the universe and the beauty of all the creatures. Besides, he finds the potentiality to grasp the truth. What follows is an attempt to see to what extent the Mariner is symbolic of a romantic poet, or a true romantic poet according to Peckham. This study traces the different states the Mariner goes through changing from a negative romanticist to a positive one. The changes are accompanied by change in attitude towards the universe and unity with it. Furthermore, projections of Coleridge as a romantic poet, on his imaginatively created character help reveal more about the Mariner.

Keywords: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Symbol, Imagination, Isolation, Unity with Nature, Negative Romanticism.

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Introduction

Being the most symbolic and philosophical of all romantic poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge abounds his poems with symbols that carry his special and unique ideas. The way he creates the symbols is very challenging and what is certain is that he creates them through “esemplastic power,” his creative imagination¹. What explores romantic minds and imaginations is the relation of the universe to life that eventuates, as its final outcome, in symbolism. The universe is itself a symbolic system, full of symbolic objects, capable of conveying unique ideas by romantic poets concerning life, and truth.

As Abrams says, “the romantics described the physical universe as giving direct access to God, and even as itself possessing the attributes of divinity.” The view of God’s creation as a symbolic system held that “natural objects are symbols, possessing a natural correspondence to the spiritual world,” which helped the emergence of “a romantic tendency in the form of a symbolist poetry” in which every creature is significant beyond appearance (2, 9). Symbolism is the means Coleridge employs to communicate what he thinks and feels as a romantic poet. This is what House emphasizes when he considers the “communication of thoughts and feelings so as to

produce joy” (151) as the end and immediate aim of poetry.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, which is a “touchstone of themes, and techniques, narrative and lyrical” (Jones, 1) demonstrates Coleridge’s talent for making stories full of magic and fantasy. The Mariner’s story is also full of figures that appear and disappear without reasons; figures to be taken imaginatively as the outcome of an unconscious and symbolic mind. It is imagination that enables the romantic poet to present spiritually perceived things and resolves his internal conflict by returning to “dynamic organicism” (Peckham 232). However, before approaching salvation, the romantic poet may suffer in the “period of doubt and despair,” leading to his alienation and rejection of imagination’s free play. Coleridge always thought himself “isolated and misunderstood” and alienation for him was “of the greatest threats” (Terada, 260). However, in isolation, the imaginative power enhances one’s potentiality in observing the reality and grasping the truth. The alienation has a healing power, for the “consciousness heals itself by a complex act of invention” (Bloom 35), and he is influenced by nature’s influxes which eventuates in joy.

By employing symbolic uses of different objects, Coleridge reinforces the psychological conditions of man and different states of the mind. Even his characters - the Mariner as an instance - become symbols in relation to their condition of inner psychological tension. Accordingly, the Mariner becomes a romantic symbol of Adam after the sin, and finds his own reality in the sense of the romantic rebellion against “static mechanism” and

1. In this case Coleridge talks about “primary imagination” and “secondary imagination,” the former, as Coleridge believes, is the power of receiving different impressions from the external world. For him the latter is the power, which receives the impressions, unites them and creates completely new images out of them.

ignorance of reality. Nature and its images symbolize the Mariner's feelings, and the myths employed by Coleridge reflect the processes of the mind. The communication between Nature and Mind is what happens to the romantic poet, when in the state of "dynamic organicism". Coleridge bridges the gap between thought and mind. Even sounds and forms of beauty that represent the eternal language of God are formed by the poet's creative imagination. The Mariner hears nature's joyful voices, and believes in the images he sees. "When images are believed, they generate tactile effects, and ...possess[ing] those effects, they count as actual...or believed in" (Terada, 272). The Mariner goes to tell his story as a romantic poet and makes aware man of the truth of unity with nature.

Coleridge's place in the canon of English poetry rests on a comparatively small body of achievement, but enormous books, articles, and critical essays written on his poetry are strikingly remarkable. *The Road to Xanadu* (1927) by John Livingston Lowes, is a tremendous work of learning, which begins by tracing Coleridge's readings and discovers the images that passed from the poet's conscious to unconscious state of mind. There is no emphasis on the moral interpretation of *The Ancient Mariner*. Lowes insists that Coleridge's intentions were neither philosophical nor Christian but superstitious and legendary. *The Ancient Mariner* is full of superstitious figures that appear and disappear with no reason. The characters are supernatural or at least romantic, and Coleridge never imitates ordinary life.

E. M. W. Tillyard has based an article on *The Ancient Mariner* in which he goes beyond Lowes in accepting an implicit symbolism in the spiritual adventure of the voyage, the Mariner, the isolation in crime, and the "archetypal pattern" of rebirth of the soul. He is interested in the theme of the romantic wanderer, isolated in his own mind. Killing the Albatross results death of the imagination and the slaying corresponds to the death of Christ in history turning the Mariner into a wanderer or Cain bearing the sin of unfaithfulness to the "One Life."

Robert P. Warren's article "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading" is a symbolist criticism and an analysis of *The Ancient Mariner*. He believes that the love of beauty leads to sympathy even for the water snakes, and the Mariner is redeemed in spirit. His imagination is revived and the Mariner as a romantic poet, grasps the sense of oneness with nature, though in isolation. This signifies the end of "the period of doubt and despair."

W. Pafford in his *Coleridge's Wedding Guest* (1963) says that *The Ancient Mariner* presents a deliberate contrast between the background of the wedding and the Mariner's tale. The interruptions of the Wedding Guest are meant to point out this contrast that is between two aspects of reality, always coexistent. The Mariner's separation from the convivial humanity is dramatized. The Mariner who is described as "skinny", "the gray-beard loon" with "glittering eyes" is set apart from the communal ceremony and appears as a romantic poet in contrast with the Wedding Guest, attending

a conjugal ceremony, symbolizing reality and ordinary life.

George Whalley in *The Mariner and the Albatross* (1947) calls the poem "a personal allegory," and emphasizes the extent to which the Mariner's suffering, loneliness, and fears are projections of Coleridge's own feelings. He says that the voyage is the voyage of a poet in his poetic creation and the Mariner is a great poet. This is the reason many readers have identified the Mariner with Coleridge. Both have discovered wild and strange truths, alien to their contemporaries, and both have struggled to make others see them. "The Mariner" comments on the problem of the artist in the Western world. The poet has to appear as a "gray-beard loon" in a new age of oppression to better convey his message.

George Herbert Clark's article in *The Queen's Quarterly* (1933), "Certain Symbols in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" makes a shift from allegory to symbolism. The symbols of Law (the Sun, the Polar Spirit, the First Voice) are opposed to the symbols of Love (the Moon, the Hermit, the Second Voice). The poem is abounding with symbols, the most important of which is the Albatross symbolizing imagination and unity with nature.

D.W. Harding in *The Theme of the Ancient Mariner* suggests that the Mariner is symbolic of all human experience. The article emphasizes the personal emotion of isolation. It is the penalty for lack of love, and the redemption of the Mariner is partial.

Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934), G.Wilson Knight's *Starlit Dome* (1941),

and Kenneth Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) have common views on Coleridge's poem, chiefly in terms of the symbols of Psychoanalysis and Anthropology applicable to mankind as part of his unity with nature.

Main Discussion

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of the most philosophical and symbolic Romantic poets. His greatness lies in the creation of myths and symbols through his creative imagination. For Coleridge, myth is the greatest symbol and he deduces truth from those myths. Because of this specialty and unique notion of truth, Coleridge chooses his symbols as disguises for them. It is his symbolism that communicates his thoughts and feelings.

The purpose of this study is to delineate Coleridge's creative imagination with its symbol-making power, and then see to what extent the Mariner is symbolic of Coleridge as a romantic poet. We are moved by Coleridge's poetry because it presents, in symbolic forms, our own most fundamental desires, which are the origin of myths. Myths are born out of unsettled minds and Coleridge's myths are created through his creative imagination. His imagination is never static and its dynamicity has amazed the critics. Coleridge defies the idea that the world is a static mechanism and God a watchmaker. Therefore, even the moon as a symbol finds significance in representing the dynamicity of nature by its slow and upward movement. Everything has a kind of movement in Coleridge's poetry, and a process of development or "becoming" that can easily be felt. The process is indispensable even to Coleridge himself if he

intends to deal with the myth of the fallen man and his salvation, as it is the story of "The Ancient Mariner" and for whom pleasure lies in "motion, doing, acting, [and] speeding" (Taylor, 564). The killing of the Albatross or the original sin is imagined necessary to make the Mariner a fallen man and to prepare the grounds for psychic rebirth. That is why "if the bird in its mythological configuration were not shot, the Mariner would remain an eternal child in Eden" (Woodman 66).

This study shows how the crime or sin of killing a bird that shares the "One Life"¹ of nature, turns the Mariner into a fallen man and therefore how much he is likened to a romantic poet. As loss of innocence is the suffering, Adam went through, loss of imagination or "death-in-life" is the consequence of being treacherous to nature. It is interesting to see whether the Mariner is afflicted by such a loss or not, and whether he finds the ability to resolve his conflict and exit the "static mechanism" and become a positive romanticist. It is Coleridge's imagination that communicates these experiences that come like unexpected gifts when it achieves the sense of fulfillment. For Coleridge, unity with nature is analogous to "...loss of one's separate identity to refind oneself with the object experienced..." (Suther 116); an experience which definitely produces joy, an experience the Mariner wishes to convey to the

Guest and make him aware of the oneness of the creatures with nature. As a romantic poet, the Mariner has a story to tell, a story rich in symbolic meaning. One of the ways of interpreting it, is to read it as an "allegory of the regeneration of a degenerated soul" (Abrams 250) and to look at the poem as the purgatory of Coleridge's *Divine Comedy* in which *Kubla Khan* represents the Paradise and *Christabel*, the Hell. It is a psychological study of guilt, punishment, remorse, and partial forgiveness. The poem is the story of a mariner's motiveless crime of killing a friendly bird of good omen, loneliness and purgatorial redemption. This picks up the theme of a loss in the quality of perceptual experience, death of imagination, and failure to grasp the symphony and song among the natural creatures. Coleridge believes that a poem, in order to be recognized as a product of creative imagination, must always involve some symbolism. Therefore, he symbolizes the character and presents an account of the failure of the mystical experience of beauty. For Coleridge, it was mystical communion with nature as well as poetic experience that provided fulfillment. It is through imagination that he bridges the gap between self and nature. A further study will reveal whether the Mariner is exposed to such a gap and how he settles his inner conflict in order to believe that all created things are good and linked.

For taking the Mariner as a romantic poet, a more detailed study is required about the stages, the Mariner goes through. Furthermore, our main focus will be Peckham's definition of romanticism that critics agree on as the most appropriate.

1. In a letter to Sotheby, Coleridge reinforces the idea of oneness in nature: "...he will know what it [nature] is who believes and feels that everything has a life of its own and that we are all "One Life." A poet's heart and intellect should be ...unified with the great appearances of nature" (quoted by House, 87).

In his book, *Literary Criticism* (1992), Tilak devotes a chapter on Coleridge and his view of imagination that “creates new shapes and forms of beauty by fusing and unifying the different impressions it receives from the external world” (228-29).

Coleridge’s dynamic imagination selects images from nature, breaks the appearances, and mixes them with emotion. Out of the chaos of images, Coleridge can make new and fresh ones unique to himself, bearing his emotions and the notion of truth as he sees in nature.

The goal of imagination, for Coleridge, seems to be “beauty” which he associates with truth. It is precisely what Keats believes when he states “what imagination seizes as beauty must be truth” (*Letters* 257). The truth, Coleridge wishes to convey through his poems and especially *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is the beauty of nature and man’s faith in benevolence of the Universe. Therefore, Nature, as a symbol finds significance and symbolizes “spiritual qualities and powers that can profoundly influence man’s spirit and mind” (Haqiqi 181-2). Coleridge in his poems explores the relationships between nature and mind. Coleridge’s nature is where one finds goodness and beauty, and its communication with the creative mind reveals the truth that he represents in symbolic forms.

As it was mentioned earlier, imagination and symbol are two key concepts whose study leads to better understanding of Coleridge’s poems. Since he is a critic as well as a poet, the development of his thoughts can best be shown in his poems that are the real sources. *The Rime* is a work of pure

imagination, and beautifully portrays the crime committed by the Mariner, the punishment that follows, and the reconciliation of the Mariner with nature. It is the story of a mariner’s motiveless crime of killing a friendly bird of good omen, the Albatross,¹ and the loneliness that follows it. The Mariner looks like a Romantic poet and described as if he is not an ordinary man. He is telling his story to a Wedding Guest who looks like an ordinary man attending the ceremony.

The Mariner’s story begins with the merry departure from a port in England. The storm blast takes hold of the ship and takes it to the South Pole; the land of ice. The Albatross appears, whom the Mariner shoots and becomes spiritually dead. The mariner himself is not sure about why he committed such a crime, and as Terada says Coleridge believed that “effects of ghostliness are caused by insufficient consciousness of one’s own actions” (262) leading to the morose and frightening images he sees.

The ship’s departure from England suggests Peckham’s “dynamic organicism”². This is a state in which the unity among creatures is not broken and the poet is imaginatively active. The poet is united with nature and perceives this unity imaginatively. The ship moves to the South Pole, the world of ice to which it is driven stands for death and “static mechanism”. The Albatross, the

1. The Albatross symbolizes the nature, creative imagination, divinity, and the principle of “One Life” through which Coleridge believes in a kind of unity existing among all creatures.

2. For further information refer to Morse Peckham’s “Toward a theory of Romanticism.” pp.232-36.

symbol of nature and imagination comes to the Mariner's aid. Shooting the bird marks the beginning of the Mariner's "period of doubt and despair", or "Negative Romanticism", (235) or Carlyle's "Everlasting No". By shooting down the Albatross, the Mariner breaks the bond between him and nature, and becomes spiritually dead. The poem becomes an "allegory of guilt and regeneration", (Abjadian 250) an extended symbol disguising Coleridge's ideas, concerning man and nature. A true romantic poet, according to Peckham, is the one who leaves the "static mechanism", a state in which man and universe are perceived as machines, for the state of "dynamic organicism" in which the man and the poet are creative through the power of imagination. By killing the bird and being treacherous to the principle of "One Life", the Mariner enters the "period of doubt and despair" as a negative romanticist. He is then afflicted by psychic death. It is through the power of imagination and love of nature that he reaffirms the benevolence of the universe and returns to the "dynamic organicism," where his inner tensions are resolved.

When in the "static mechanism," the Mariner, who is alien to his people and "set off...by the experience [shooting the Albatross] he has lived through"(Suther 90), discovers wild and strange truths and wishes to make others see them. He is a romantic poet who has a story to tell because, to quote Wordsworth's definition of poetry in the "preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, "good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (246). The Mariner suffers the consequences of psychic separation and conjures up nature as hostile. From the

world of ice and snow, the mariners who accompany the Mariner, enter the world of fire and heat, symbolizing death, alienation and suffering. "At a loss for other explanations, Coleridge posits supernatural presences" (Terada, 262). The supernatural visions of "Death" and "Life-in-Death" play dice on the "Skeleton Ship". "Life-in-Death" wins the Mariner's soul and other mariners' souls are won by "Death". The dice, an instrument of chance, symbolizes nature's hostility and indifference of natural forces. Isolation and guilt possess the Mariner's soul. His imagination is dead because of Albatross's death. The crime is against the world and therefore against the creative imagination. It revives with the revival of the capacity to see and appreciate the beauty of nature and this is possible only in isolation: "Salvation can only be found alone"(Watson 102). It is in isolation that the romantic poet's unconscious mind rises an impulse of affirmation, love, acceptance and the imagination becomes activated. He unconsciously praises the beauty of water snakes and the results of conversion follow. Natural images initiate processes of interior reflection and interaction of the mind and nature. Blessing these natural creatures becomes the turning point and the "period of doubt and despair" comes to its end. The blessing is caused by "natural beauty and domestic love before him" (White, 195) and the poet's consciousness is expanded. God speaks through natural images and the active soul can hear the song of nature. The wind that stimulates the imagination blows and brings about a great change: the Mariner's psychic rebirth and regeneration. Typically the romantic wind is a wild and free one: an emblem of the free romantic spirit, breath of God, and power of healing. As an archetypal image, the wind symbolizes change in

psychological conditions, and it is the source of ecstasy and creative agitation. It is the theme of romantic poetry; it is the stimulant of imagination and produces joy. It is the means for a radical change. We cannot believe that "Coleridge was not thinking of the mysterious wind that blows on the Mariner, without any awareness of the wind as a Biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit" (Goldenessays, 1).

Appreciation of God's creatures leads to love and he sees all creatures as one and unified. The Mariner grasps the truth of beauty and oneness of nature, and through imagination bridges the gap between self and the universe. His active mind has the energy to produce images and in the *Biographia* he argues that the act of "poetic composition" and "activity of the mind" produce "passion" and "excitement" (2. 14). Now the whole world comes to the Mariner's aid guiding the ship home. The "Polar Spirit" and the angels that relieve the mariners are invisible creatures, the "product[s] of ... an imagination" (Watson 93) that come to his help symbolizing immortality. The characters, Coleridge brings into his poems, are not always believable and probable. In this case, he talks about the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (*Biographia Literaria* Chp.14). What is not believable in Coleridge, is usually symbolic.¹

The Mariner's conflict is resolved through the creative imagination and he learns that life is a voyage of discovery that leads man from

1. Coleridge disagrees with Aristotle that characters should be possible, probable, and believable. Coleridge's poems are filled with symbolic characters and figures that may appear and disappear with no reason.

innocence to sin and then love that is needed to redeem mankind. The Mariner's development, psychic rebirth and regeneration are completed and the theme of imagination as well as faith in unity is reinforced. The Mariner as a positive romanticist goes through the experience and now feels the responsibility to tell his story to mankind.

Biblical symbolism in the poem mainly "deals with the Mariner's revelation that good will triumph over evil, and his acceptance of all nature as God's creation" (Goldenessays, 1). Coleridge's poems are meaningful through the use of symbols; yet, his symbolism is open to different interpretations on various levels. That is why, there is always doubt about the final and true meaning of Coleridge's poems, the reason T.S. Eliot admires his language. Eliot in his essay on "Metaphysical Poets" states, "the poet must become more indirect to ...dislocate...language into his meaning" (Eliot 281). For Coleridge, an idea is fully grasped in a symbol and his symbolic and indirect language, praised by many critics, helps readers grasp his ideas.

Conclusion

There is much to be done before reaching to the final description, analysis and evaluation of Coleridge's thoughts, mainly his theories concerning the creative imagination and symbolism. What is unique about Coleridge's symbols is that they are open to interpretation on different levels and can carry positive and negative meanings at a time.

Nature in Coleridge's poems, is not the hostile nature as many other poets present it to be so. It is exactly the place where one's view of the world is

changed and highest of all, psychic rebirth takes place. With regard to the Romantic poetry and specially Coleridge's poetry, Wellek's three criteria seems to be the most significant ones: "Imagination for the view of poetry; nature for the view of the world; and symbol and myth for poetic style"(193). It is believed that romanticism is almost confined to the revival of medievalism, and the myths of classical antiquity were recreated by romantic poets and "given new life and potency as well as high poetical values"(Bush 18). That is the reason much meaning can be deduced from myths and imaginatively created symbols.

We see that the symbols and myths created by Coleridge represent the inmost thoughts and feelings of the human race and they are representative of philosophical truths. After going through Coleridge's poems the reader takes the myths and symbols, as reflections of natural processes of Coleridge's and accordingly human mind. With regard to *the Ancient Mariner*, the processes are so reflected that the reader can easily keep track of them, while focusing on the Mariner.

The Mariner, the same as a true romantic poet, leaves the state of "static mechanism" for the state of "dynamic organicism" in which the man and the poet are radically creative through the power of imagination. The Mariner becomes his own redeemer and provides psychic rebirth for himself. He becomes a Christ-figure and gains an infinite individuality that is "linked with...an all-inclusive totality, other and greater than the highest degree of revelation". When in the state of "static mechanism", he fails to perceive the power of

revelation and becomes a negative romanticist. The Mariner goes through a "period of doubt and despair", after shooting the Albatross, in which he doubts the benevolence of the universe and thus is afflicted by psychic death. Finally, he achieves his own psychic rebirth and reaffirms meaning and benevolence in the universe through the power of imagination. The Mariner returns, in Peckham's words, to "dynamic organicism". What makes the romantic poets distinguished in thought and idea, is their psychic rebirth, grasp of truth, and being exposed to a weird experience achieved imaginatively, and love of nature that follows. Coleridge believes that "human experience leaves a lot to be desired, and we can neither be reconciled to it nor simply accept our lack of reconciliation" (Terada, 260). Indeed, it is imagination and creative power that enable mankind to face life with strong faith. Therefore, separation from society, isolation, and escape into nature become important because it is in nature that he becomes aware of his own individuality and his unity with the universe. The romantic poet's development, psychic rebirth and regeneration become possible in isolation.

The Mariner, as a romantic poet "has the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader [the Guest] to the truth of nature and ideality,"(Abjadian 40) making a wiser and therefore sadder man out of the Guest. The Guest is reduced to the state of a mere listener and "mesmerized by the swaying cobra of the poet's craftsmanship" (Taylor, 558).

The poem as a "romantic horror ballad" (Jones, 1), is a voyage of discovery for the Mariner who seeks inspiration and communion with nature.

Nature helps the Mariner's psychic rebirth when he blesses "the water snakes unaware": He is redeemed through "liberation of the unconscious" (Peckham 232), and it is when nature is no more melancholy. As a positive romanticist, the Mariner comes to a strong faith in the benevolence of the universe and tries to resolve his mental conflict and the Hermit he meets, can be identified with the "figure of Jesus" or a "son" or a "friend", which constitutes "the object of Coleridge's ... faith" (White, 185). The narrator of the poem finally finds it impossible not to love all things in the world-what Coleridge wishes to convey in every single word of his poetry- because they are filled with beauty and they are linked. Coleridge's fear of losing his imagination is shown in the Mariner's sin and passivity. If he is won by "Life-in-Death" that is because his imagination dies and loss of imagination is what Coleridge calls "death-in-life." The more he feels that he is passive and acted upon, the more he is frightened, and he notes that "the closer the philosopher brings his ideas and impressions, the more isolated from other people he is likely to be" (Terada, 278). Grasping the truth requires an active soul as well as imagination so that the voice of God is heard through natural beauty.

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