



THE RIME OF ANCIENT MARINER AS AN ALLEGORY OF GUILT AND REGENERATION

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (born on Oct. 21st, 1772 – death on July 25th, 1834) is a co-founder of romantic poetry in English literature. In his rich imagination and symbolism, in his suggestiveness and treatment of the supernatural, in his love of nature and the dream quality of his poetry, in his medievalism and fascination for the remote and the distant and above all in his melancholy and his love of music. He is a romantic poet every inch. Romanticism reaches its acme in his poetry. In the words of a critic, his poetry is the most finished, supreme embodiment of all that is the purest and the most ethereal in the romantic spirit.

INTRODUCTION

The Rime of Ancient Mariner is a simple allegory of guilt and regeneration. It is divided into seven parts. Beginning with the commission of guilt in Part I, each part tells of a new stage in the process towards regeneration, till Part VII concludes with whatever redemption is possible in the case. The entire process is depicted as it would appear to a conscience sharpened and clarified with imagination.

In Part I (The killing of the Albatross - an innocent bird), An Ancient Mariner, with his long grey beard and glittering eyes, detained one of the three guests who were going to a marriage feast. But he did not like being interrupted and asked the Mariner why he had been detained. The first part tells of the actual crime and at the end of part Mariner shoots the Albatross, but nowhere does he explain his motives in shooting it. To us the shooting of the bird may seem a matter of little moment. But Coleridge makes it significant in two ways: 1. He does not say

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why the Mariner kills the albatross. It may be in a mood of annoyance or anger or mere frivolity; but these are mere guesses. This uncertainty of the Mariner's motives illustrates the essential irrationality of his crime; a simple perversity of the will. 2. The crime is against nature, against the sacred relations of guest and host. The bird has been hailed in God's name as if it had been a Christian soul and is friendly and helpful. It is wantonly killed. There is no need to argue that Coleridge was at this time possessed by Neo Platonic ideas of the brotherhood of all living things. What matters is that the Mariner breaks a sacred law of life. In his action we see the frivolity of many crimes against humanity and the ordered system of the world and we must accept the killing of the albatross as symbolical of them. At the end of the Part I Coleridge describes the mind of the mariner with these lines;

*"God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the friends that plague thee thus!
Why look'st thou so?" - With my cross-bow,
I shot the Albatross"*

The Albatross is an innocent bird. The mariner kills this bird. It is a great crime. He has disturbed the harmony of nature. He realizes his mistakes and even repents for it. But it is not enough. He is punished. He has to suffer very much. This story is the story of crime and punishment. Even now he cannot explain why he killed the bird. It remains a mystery till the end. But when he tells the story, he again becomes sad and repent. He is sorry for it even now.

S. T. Coleridge knows human nature very well. Many a times, man does some wrong. But he cannot give reasons for doing so. But once the crime is committed, he has to suffer for it. He has even punished and the punishment is far greater than crime.

In Part II (The crew suffer terribly for their sin), The Mariner's shipmates become accomplices in the crime. At first they condemn the Mariner for having killed the bird of good omen. But when the fog clears off and a glorious sun shines in the sky, they approve of his action; "Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, That bring the fog and mist."

S. T. Coleridge here tells us the story of crime and punishment. The Mariner kills the bird and will be punished. But the sailors also will have to suffer. This suffering would appear unjustified. But now when they agree that he has done the right thing they become partners in sin. It is also a sin and they will also be punished and it is justified. In this part of the poem, the corruption and the helplessness which are the common attributes of guilt are transferred to the physical world. The ship is suddenly becalmed. The ship enters the line. The sun shines brightly. It is very hot and copper sky. Coleridge here describes the condition of the sailors with following lines;

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*“Water, water every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water every where
Nor any drop to drink.”*

The ship stands still. It stands in the sea. Wherever you see, you find water everywhere. But here it is scorching heat. Even the boards of the ship shrink. The sailors also feel very thirsty. But the sea water is full of salt. It cannot be drunk. Thus though there is water everywhere, the sailors cannot drink that water. These lines describe the suffering of sailors. Days pass. But there is no movement. The sea is very silent. There is no life. It is really a terrible experience. This suffering is part of the punishment. The mariner has killed the innocent bird and for that, the punishment has started. These are very well-known lines and often quoted.

The ocean begins to rot. Now the poet describes the sea at night. The sailors see a terrible thing. The fire dances at different places. It appears here. It appears there. It appears everywhere. These are known as witch's fire. In the light of this fire, the sea-water sparkles. It appears that somebody, probably a witch has poured oil on the water and now the sea-water appears green or blue or white. The sailors pass through these terrible experiences. It is a part of the punishment. It is believed that if on a ship death-fires are seen or witch's oil is seen spread on water, it is a warning that the ship will pass through some terrible experience. It might even bring death to its crew. This is a superstition. Coleridge creates a powerful supernatural atmosphere by such touches.

In this way the end of the second part, the Mariner begins to suffer punishment for what he has done. Coleridge describes the sailors' attitude towards the Mariner with these lines;

*“Ah ! Well-a-day ! what evil looks
Had I from : the old and the young !
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.”*

The sailors believe that the Mariner has committed a sin. He is guilty. He should be punished. But the sailors are with him. They have to suffer terribly. It is because of the Mariner that they have to suffer. So they hang the dead body of the Albatross on his neck. It is very significant that they do not hang the cross. The Mariner is guilty. But even now, he does not feel sorry about it. He does not repent sincerely. He will not get divine mercy. And so the cross cannot be hung on his neck. It is very natural that the dead body of Albatross is hung on his neck.



Part III (All the sailors die, and the Mariner is left to suffer alone) begins with following lines;

*“With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
We could nor laugh nor wail;
Through utter drought all dumb we stood!
It bit my arm, I sucked the blood,
And cried, A sail ! a sail !”*

Now the ship has entered the line. Here is a land of scorching heat. The Mariner sees something coming. All the sailors want to speak. But this place is very hot. They feel very very thirsty. Even the lips have become black and dry. Now they want to speak but they could not speak. Their throats have gone very dry. The Mariner bites his arm and drinks his own blood. It makes his throat wet. And he is able to speak. He shouts that he sees the sail of a ship. It means that a ship is coming near them. There is water everywhere. Yet there is not a drop of water to drink. His throat and lips have become very dry. They should be made wet. For that, the Mariner has to drink his own blood. It is really a terrible experience. The stanza is very vivid and appropriate. It gives us an exact idea of the effects of extreme thirst. It also makes us understand the agony of thirst through which the Mariner and his companions must have passed.

The third section shows how the guilty soul becomes conscious of what it has done and of its isolation in the world. It is with the appearance on the scene of the phantom ship with its ghastly crew, Death and Life-in-Death, the forces of retribution are set into motion. The Mariner's condition is metaphorically suggested when he feels that, as the ship comes close to them, the sun is flecked with bars. Death and Life-in-Death play at the dice. The Mariner is won by Life-in-Death while the sailors fall to the lot of Death. Accordingly, they all curse him and then drop down dead one by one. Their souls passing by him like the whizz of his cross-bow, with which he had shot the Albatross. He survives them, for his guilt being more serious, he is condemned to an experience of Life-in-Death. In this way Coleridge ends this part with these lines;

*“The souls did from their bodies fly,-
They fled to bliss or woe !
And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my cross-bow ! ”*

The Mariner has killed the Albatross. It is a sin. And he suffers for it. He passes through fearful experiences. The poet describes one such experience through the above lines. Two hundred sailors are with him. They have to suffer with him. Now Life-in-Death is a fearful

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woman. Under her evil influence, these two hundred men begin to die. Their bodies fall on the ground. But the Mariner looks at their eyes. They are full of curse for the Mariner. Now even the souls leave the bodies. But the souls pass by the ears of the Mariner. The Mariner remembers his cross-bow. It reminds him of his crime.

At the end of every part, Coleridge makes the Mariner refer to his sin. Here also he remembers his cross-bow. It is with this cross-bow that he has killed the innocent bird. This makes him suffer all the more. The two hundred sailors are not living. But they are not dead also. Life is suspended for some time. The Mariner looks at these two hundred dead bodies. This makes him suffer all the more.

Since the Mariner has committed a sin against God's creation as well as God, he is alienated from both of them. This sense of alienation is depicted in the beginning of Part IV (The beginning of the Mariner's penance);

*"Alone, alone, all all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea !
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony."*

The saints do not pity him because he does not deserve their pity. He regrets that so many beautiful men lie died on the deck while 'a thousand slimy things' live on. This suggests that he still refuses to acknowledge the worth of his fellow creatures. He tries to pray but fails;

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

The climax is reached when for seven days and seven nights, he has to face the curse in the dead men's eyes but he does not die. Then comes turn for the better. Under the benign influence of the moon, the Mariner watches the water-snakes moving in tracks of shining white and feels fascinated with their rich attire. A spring of love gushes from his heart and he blesses them unawares. Immediately he is able to pray and the Albatross falls into the sea. This marks partial revival.

Thus, at the end of Part IV, the sense of isolation is elaborated. The guilty soul is cut off not merely from human contact, but also from the consoling friendship of nature. Then a turn comes for the better when the Mariner, now purified by suffering, unconsciously blesses the water-snakes. He , thus begins to re-establish relations with the world of the affections. This

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opens the way to the future. The spirit, which did not die in the Mariner, shows some small signs of that love which holds life together.

Part V (The Mariner's penance comes to a close) continues the process of regeneration. The Mariner is able to sleep and when he gets up, long awaited rain brings him comfort and freshness. Now that his heart is no longer dry as dust, this feeling of freshness is quite inevitable. There is commotion in the sky and a strong wind begins to blow. The ship begins to move with the roaring sound of the wind though it is not touched by it. If the wind may be taken as a symbol of the onward flow of life, this it is a sign of partial recovery. A troop of celestial spirits stands by the bodies of the dead men and begins to work on the ropes. The body of his brother's son stands by him, knee to knee. They pull at one rope but not even a single word is exchanged between them. The Mariner is no longer alone, but the company he has got is still terrifying. Then he hears heavenly music in the air and is comforted by it. In a way, he has reconciled himself to God's creation, but before he can be fully healed, he must reconcile himself to God as well. So at the end of Part V, we are told; "The man hath penance done, And penance more will do."

In this way, this section continues the process of the soul's revival. The ship begins to move and the heavenly spirits stand by the bodies of the dead men. The Mariner hears heavenly music in the air and is comforted by it. Before he can be fully healed he must establish relations not only with men but with God and then faintly and feebly does he begin to do it. When the music flows into his soul and delights him, he is on the way to recovery. But he has still his penance to do but he is ready for it.

In Part VI (The Mariner reaches home), the process of healing seems to be disturbed. The Mariner is haunted by the presence of his dead comrades and feels that it has been planned by some fearful power vengeance;

*"Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread."*

In this figure of the Mariner, haunted by memories and fears Coleridge gives his special symbol of remorse. But because remorse brings repentance and humility, the section closes with the vision of angelic forms standing by the dead sailors. The forgiveness of God awaits even the most hard-hearted sinner, if he only wants to receive it.



In Part VII (The penance is over), the last part brings the story to its end. The Mariner reaches back his own country. He meets the holy man Hermit, confesses his guilt and is shriven and restored to a place among living men. The Mariner confesses his crime through following lines;

*“O Shrieve me, shrieve me holy man!
The Hermit crossed his brow,
‘Say Quick’, quoth he ‘I bid thee say-
What manner of man art thou?’ ”*

The Mariner feels very unhappy. He repents and prays sincerely. Even the saints take pity on him. But still, he feels that his sin is not washed away. When he sees the Hermit, he feels very happy. Here is a Hermit. He prays God. He might help him to wash away the sin. So the Mariner requests the Hermit to wash away the sin. The Mariner appears just like a ghost. He does not take him to be a human being. Still he asks him to confess his sin. He wants to know everything from the Mariner.

These words help the Mariner to confess the sin. Words flow out from his mouth. He begins to tell his own story. When he tells everything, he feels very free. He feels very happy. The Hermit is a man of God. He prays God regularly. He has the power the help others to wash away their sins. Here he helps the Mariner to wash away his sins. The Mariner suffers very much. But that is not enough. He should confess his sin before a saint and a saint can help him to wash away his sins.

With the sinking of the ship, most of the visible traces of his crime are obliterated but the punishment of Life-in-Death continues to be at work. The memory of the hideous act he once committed becomes so insistent at times that he is forced to give utterance to it. This brings him relief. In a way, he is regenerated.

This interpretation of *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* as an allegory of guilt and regeneration brings it a new dimension. It saves it from being a fanciful tale of nightmarish horrors and makes it pertinent to life and its fundamental issues.

In this way, in this poem Coleridge gives us truth of God and end of the poem he writes following lines for human beings through the Mariners confession;

*“He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.”*

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These famous and oft-quoted lines bring home to us the moral of the poem. God has created this world. All the great and small things are created by God. He is the father and he loves all these things. God has created men, birds and beasts. Man should love all these things because God loves them all. It is good to go to the Church and pray. The Church becomes full of men, women and children and they pray God. This is not enough. In our ordinary life, we should love the things created by God. To love all these things is to love God and it is the best prayer.

S. T. Coleridge here expresses the moral of the poem. The Mariner kills the bird, Albatross. He disturbs the peace of nature. No one has a right to kill innocent men, birds and beasts. It is a sin and he has to suffer very much. He also punished. This experience makes him sad but he has become wise. His life has become nobler and richer. It is a very fruitful experience. It expresses a very simple truth but it grows from his own personal experience.

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