

## **“Death in Life”: purgatory, creation, and creativity in the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

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### **Abstract**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English romantic poet, critic, and philosopher, is widely recognized for his vibrant romantic imagination, affinity for nature, and portrayal of the supernatural. In his renowned narrative poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Coleridge recounts the harrowing tale of a mariner whose life, and the lives of his fellow sailors, takes a dramatic turn following his thoughtless and dreadful act of killing a harmless Albatross. The Mariner grapples with intense inner turmoil and a profound sense of guilt stemming from this act, and is doomed to spend the rest of his life purging himself by repeating his story to whomever he convinces to listen. This paper employs an analytical methodology to highlight how effectively the poet employs imagery and symbolism in portraying the poem’s atmosphere of suspense and mystery, the beauty of creation, and how the Mariner is doomed to repeat his narrative to any person he convinces to listen as he struggles to overcome his guilt. It will reveal, through a detailed thematic analysis, how the Mariner’s voyage is transformed into a profound and enlightening journey centered around indispensable lessons concerning purgatory, acceptance, and repentance. Doing so, can shed light on the fear of the afterlife through which man, like the Mariner, should understand in order to realize the importance of the meaning of life and its significance when facing death. This paper will contribute to two arguments which are first, that the Mariner is paying the price for disrupting nature, and secondly that he is doing penance for being responsible for committing a crime against God. In all cases, a crime against nature is a crime against God.

**Keywords:** *Coleridge, creation, creativity, death-in-life, penance, purgatory.*

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## I. Introduction

Death, an inevitable aspect of life, is portrayed in various ways within the world of literature, and has occupied a central position among the themes of justice, redemption, grief, and relief. During the nineteenth century romantic period, death was considered a beautiful and tranquil experience and a gateway to an idealized afterlife or a reunion with nature. It emphasized the transience of life and in so doing, inspired existential questions related to the meaning of life, the purpose of human existence, and the potential existence of an afterlife. Among the Romantic poets of the era, Samuel Taylor Coleridge stands out as a poet-philosopher whose exploration of the experience of death resonates with readers on a profound and artistic level. In his masterpiece *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he establishes the transformative nature of artistic expression as he elevates the portrayal of death and the profound theme of redemption.

Coleridge possessed a deep religious fervor that is based on a complex and unique understanding of Christianity; one that questions and challenges conventional religious interpretations. Kathleen Coburn (1974) noticed that Coleridge, “From the days of his earliest childish prayers to the final days when he asked to be left undisturbed, alone with his Maker as much as possible, Coleridge was a deeply religious person in the sense of living in awe of spiritual and moral powers” (p. 67). His perception is best reflected in *The Rime*, the narrative poem in which he masterfully portrays how imminent redemption and divine justice eventually culminate in a positively satisfying conclusion. This extraordinary poem played a pivotal role in the influential collection of poems known as "Lyrical Ballads," which further solidifies Coleridge's contribution to the realm of literature.

It was with William Wordsworth, with whom he was close friends, that Coleridge collaborated to jointly publish "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798. However, their relationship went through significant strains and ultimately experienced a period of estrangement. One reason was Coleridge's personal struggles with opium addiction and health issues. Another factor was marriage troubles, and his separation from Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law who had played a significant role as Coleridge's staunchest supporter, acting as his nurse, comforter, and a steadfast companion. All of these issues affected his productivity and placed additional strain on their friendship leading to an irreparable rift between them. Yet, despite enduring personal tribulations such as a failed marriage, battles with depression, opium addiction, and moments of despair, Coleridge's artistic endeavors remained a captivating force. He defied the odds with his creativity and produced acclaimed poetry among which is *The Rime* which speaks to humanity through the theme of purgatory while it draws attention to the divine beauty of creation.

## II. Literature Review

In spite of the loneliness he experienced, Coleridge found solace in religious introspection, akin to that of the Mariner's solitude on the vast sea. His belief in the transformative power of prayer and its spiritually soothing effects is the driving force of *The Rime*, which is basically about the Mariner's suffering and his unending penance which follows his unethical or immoral act of killing the albatross. According to Christopher Stokes (2009), Coleridge's "rationale for prayer as a responsive and responsible act in the breach of violated fidelity to God can be found in simple form as early as 1810" (p. 545). He adds that, for Coleridge, "If action always fails to follow moral resolve, prayer lies somehow between act and resolution" (Stokes p. 545). In addition to his faith, Coleridge held a profound love for nature which he perceived as a formidable force imbued with supernatural elements. In *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge explains:

In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. (cited in Gettman 1961, p. 42)

He blends both faith and nature in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and masterfully portrays his conviction that imminent redemption and divine justice culminate in a calmer and spiritually satisfying state of existence. To fully appreciate the paranormal in the poem, the reader is expected to enter the state Coleridge referred to in his autobiographical *Biographia Literaria*, which he wrote in 1817, as the "willing suspension of disbelief." However, "This suspension ... does not seem to be one that critics have appreciated: the piece has been dismissed frequently as deranged and incoherent" (Stokes, 2011, p.3). As concerns the mariner, Syed Zahid Ali Shah and Nasir Jamal Khattak (2016) consider the poem inexplicable and the Mariner as an unconvincing character who "eludes histories, cultures, religions, and geographies" (96). On the other hand, for Satendra Singh and Abha Khetarpal (2012), "The Ancient Mariner symbolizes a universal sinner and all the sailors represent the human beings who too are guilty of being accomplice in crime" (para.2) Moreover, through this solitude, he recognized his own faults and engaged in deep self-reflection. His personal struggles instilled in him the belief that redemption is attainable both in the depths of solitude, and through nature. That is, true redemption is achieved through the appreciation and love for all of God's creations. In fact, the Mariner's concluding lines from the ballad reflect this sentiment: "He prayeth best, who loveth best, all things both great and small; for the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all."

The environment in which *The Rime* was written also plays a crucial role in its thematic significance. It was an age of invention, travel and discoveries. It was the Industrial Revolution – a

time when the growing influence of technology threatened the delicate balance between humanity and the natural world. Moreover, there was increased sea travel which had a strong influence on peoples' imagination especially those with an artistic bent like Coleridge. His poem therefore draws inspiration from sea journeys, and this is a fact stressed by Luke Strongman (2009) who states,

Coleridge's familiarity with the South Pacific journals of discovery, as well as the European literary influences more accustomed to enlightened British readers of the early nineteenth century, such as Erasmus Darwin, John Dryden, and William Wordsworth, infused Coleridge's writings with an awareness of the journeying towards the icy poles of both southern and northern hemispheres.

This seven-part poem embraces Romantic ideals that emphasize the appreciation of God's creation with specific focus on the beauty of the sea as a vast receptacle of unknown creatures. Interestingly, *The Rime* was an inspiration to Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" which harbors allusions to the poem in the scene where Frankenstein is desolate and expresses feelings of fear and loneliness. In fact, both works focus on the power of nature and how the lack of respect for God's creation leads to horrible consequences. Furthermore, both portray conflicted characters and how they seek to achieve purgatory and redemption through understanding their flaws. To this effect, Professor John Spicer (2020) affirms that *The Rime*, "is oddly and aptly prophetic. Human kind out of kilter with the natural world. A crisis in biodiversity. Resultant loneliness and isolation – biophilia denied or suppressed. A world in transition. Climate grief" (n.p).

Added to this, it is acknowledged that the content of the poem, such as the inclusion of the Albatross and the dead shipmates, were suggested to Coleridge by Wordsworth (Richard 2023, p.4). Yet, what fueled and heightened his vivid imagination was his addiction to opium and alcohol. As M. H. Abrams (1970) notes in his *The Milk of Paradise*, opium "tends to effect characteristic patterns of imagery which are recognizable in a number of works of literary imagination" (xiv). Coleridge also maintained an extensive postal correspondence with his family and friends, discussing a wide range of intellectual, emotional, and commercial matters. In some of his letters, he candidly expressed his struggles with health, including his battles with pain and the destructive influence of opium. He acknowledged that opium had plagued him for over three decades, causing guilt, degradation, and misery. Molly Lefebvre reports in her *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (1974) that at one time he told [a benefactor], was taking four to five ounces of laudanum a day; once he, himself, said, he took nearly a pint" (p.60) and that "he became convinced that if he continued without recourse to the drug, he would die... (p.384).

Thus, as a consequence of his addiction, imagination became the cornerstone of Coleridge's narrative technique. Through his strange stories, he is able to transform readers from limited social beings into visionary and spiritual individuals. His poems reveal extensive use of symbols of passion

– imagery, motifs, that evoke intense emotions, desires, or intense states of being – to evoke and explore the depth and power of human emotions and experiences. Basically, the Mariner represents ever sinning man, and ironically, the predicament confronting a transgressor like him is the burden of perpetual unrest. The creative portrayal of such symbolism will be the highlight of this paper.

### **III. Methodology**

To establish how the poet creatively presents the hellish state of “death in life,” an analytic methodology fits the purpose. Jonathan Culler (2007) in *The Literary in Theory* emphasize the relevance of a critical analytical methodology in interpreting literary texts and in understanding how they are being interpreted, while also mentioning Barthes’s similar stance. Basically, it is a tool that provides the cultural, historical and literary contexts that enables readers to comprehend the individual and general context from which a text was produced. According to Edward Said (1993), in spite of the subjectivity of human experience, “it is also historical and secular, it is accessible to analysis and interpretation, and—centrally important—it is not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical constructs” (p.31).

Essentially, the poem is placed within its historical context such that the effect of prevalent events, social conditions, and philosophical ideas will be analyzed to reveal how they influence the themes and motifs. Moreover, a close reading of the poem serves to consider the language and poetic devices to highlight the poet’s creativity. Such an analysis will offer insights into Coleridge's artistic choices, the significance of the poem within his oeuvre, and its broader implications in the context of Romantic literature.

### **IV. Purgatory, creation, and creativity**

To begin with, light imagery is significant in Coleridge’s creative process. John Beer (2015) observes that Coleridge regarded light as a pivotal symbol, second only to love in its ability to unify diverse elements of his thoughts. In his perception, light consistently held the potential for symbolic representation wherever it appeared. The way Coleridge uses “light” in the poem helps emphasize its innovative value. In the first place, it plays a major role in presenting change through contrast. Whether sunlight or moonlight, both sorts of light show their effect on the Mariner’s behavior throughout his strange sea voyage. It is the sunlight that tells which direction the ship is sailing “...the ship itself launched into the sea and sailed southward – he indicates the direction by describing the path of the sun” (Part I) and the moonlight which is responsible for shaping the tides “... explain that the moon and sea are working together to navigate and transport the ship” (Part VI). Secondly, the process of penance and the spiritual awakening take place in moonlight where the Mariner mentions that he sees the angels that symbolize full purgatory and redemption “...the Mariner sees the angels leaving the souls of the dead sailors for good. Rather than singing, he notes that the angels simply

wave and offer a profound, meaningful silence, a type of music in its own right” (Part VI). It could therefore be surmised that the light of both the sun and the moon together refer to the unity of God’s creation, divine influence, and the process of redemption.

Furthermore, through the metaphor of light, Coleridge conveyed the radiant and inspiring natural world which became his temple, with living pillars exuding purpose and with mankind moving through them and receiving recognition in their gaze. Abrams (1953) in his *The Mirror and The Lamp* states that for “...the romantic writers, the favourite analogy of the activity of the perceiving mind is that of a lamp projecting light” (p. 60). In support of this, in “The Prelude” Wordsworth confirms, “an auxiliar light/ Came from my mind, which on the setting sun / Bestowed a new splendor” (387), and this is what Coleridge’s Rime effectively does by revealing the light in the midst of darkness. However, for him, much like the Mariner, it remains but a fleeting glimmer, a momentary respite granted by the recounting of his tale.

Religious motifs are another highlight of the poem and are the main carriers of the major theme of redemption. One prominent example is the spectral figure of the Mariner himself, who assumes a ghostly appearance with his glittering eyes, compelling listeners to pay attention as he conveys his message through religious symbolism. The water symbolizes the power of nature and the beautiful, sparkling fish are the wonderful creations of God. To a large extent, Coleridge's symbolic language is deeply rooted in his spiritual approach to nature. Creativity and the wonder of creation are therefore central to the Mariner's journey in the poem. The Albatross itself, the innocent, beautiful bird, killed for no reason, is symbolic of man’s irrationality and a tendency for evil that should be controlled. This sin hangs around the Mariner’s neck and his conscience and will stay for eternity. The thought of that, and the despair, distress and panic of the Mariner is enough to make his listener’s fear such fate for themselves. The power of supernatural elements, such as invisible spirits from the land of mist and snow (the South Pole is supposed to be their destination), death and life-in-death, and the naked hulk, also play a significant role in emphasizing the immensity of the evil in killing an innocent creature. Notice the following lines:

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? (Part III)

These lines with their gothic atmosphere, possess a stylized directness that is associated with the poem's vividness. Metaphysical movements blur the boundaries between opposing realms life and death, consciousness, and the unconscious, including the natural and supernatural spheres. One can visualize this by imagining a matchstick ship resting on the sea's horizon. The events in the poem are categorized into three zones: the sky, the surface, and the invisible depths below. Crossing between these zones can be perilous or even evil. While the supernatural phenomena in the poem may be unsettling to modern readers, it reveals how supernatural spirits can have a strong psychological effect on man. According to Edward Bostetter:

The spiritual forces at work in the Mariner's authoritarian universe are despotic and unpredictable. It is a nightmare world of inconsequence, terror and meaningless suffering...governed by chance, where caprice is the decisive factor- as the dice-game between Death and Life-in-Death for the Mariner and his ship-mates makes clear (Hill, 1983, p. 156).

The Mariner recounts that his ship was trapped in ice, which cracked and roared like an unseen beast. It remained confined until the appearance of the Albatross, which the crew initially saw as a Christian soul. The ship then sails into a silent sea, and the burning sun allows the Mariner to express his love and humility. Ultimately, the Mariner's suffering during his journey is tantamount to a descent into hell, in what is a most fearful experience. The powers of water and air, the acts of killing and blessing, states of solitude and companionship, nightmares and awakenings, drowning and resurfacing—all serve to emphasize and prove Coleridge's creative vision.

When the Mariner regains consciousness, he finds the ship sailing peacefully on calm seas. This signifies the end of the harrowing ordeal in the sea, but not the end of the suffering of his mind and soul. The burden of his guilt will persist until the end of his life. Coleridge goes on to emphasize the Mariner's final return to land and in doing so, underscores the belief that his psychological disorientation throughout the journey might have been the result of hallucinations, dreams, or even death.

As for imagery, *The Rime* is replete with vivid ones. One striking example is the group of "undead men" whose accusing eyes are a chilling embodiment of frightful evil. The Mariner is compelled to confront this terrifying presence, which prompts him to learn through suffering and develop a profound love for all creatures. The recurrence of images such as the low burning sunset, blood, and spirits and the death of his crew in Part III, contributes to the poem's powerful religious motifs, as does Part VI when the Mariner blesses the beauty of the creatures and the spell is broken:

The self-same moment I could pray;  
 And from my neck so free  
 The albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea.

In effect, the use of metaphor is evident in Coleridge's depiction of the Mariner's "his heart as drug as dust." The ship's movement, driven not by natural winds but by the revenge of the polar spirit, adds to the poem's supernatural atmosphere. Coleridge's creativity shines through his ability to make unseen things felt and brought them to life. This unique approach resonates with readers, as unseen elements become tangible and meaningful. In a sense, the manner in which he transfers supernatural elements and spirits into the events of the story is akin to magical realism.

Purgatory is thus a significant concept in Coleridge's poem. It signifies the process of purification, harking back to early Christian beliefs that those who die in a state of grace will enter Heaven. The Mariner's purgatory is identifiable when he undergoes spiritual awakening and performs his penance, each time to recollect and regain his deep understanding of life and death, "seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse, And yet I could not die." (Part IV). Harming nature is portrayed as a moral failing, a sin that can only be rectified through a genuine appreciation for God's creatures:

One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,  
Too quick for groan or sigh,  
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,  
And cursed me with his eye.  
Four times fifty living men,  
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)  
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,  
They dropped down one by one." (Part III)

The above excerpt shows how the Mariner is condemned to witness his shipmates dying one after the other. This supernatural occurrence intensifies the Mariner's suffering and penance, and is reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* which provides a vivid account of human suffering through hell.

Coleridge's creativity is the pivotal quality of his work, particularly his ability to communicate the Mariner's desperation to tell his story effectively. The Mariner's desire to share his experiences and save others showcases Coleridge's power of communication, especially when he refers to the Mariner's "strange power of speech." His language and its vivid imagery bring the supernatural to life, allowing readers to visualize and comprehend the deeper meanings within the poem. The following lines are one example among many in which his choice of diction makes the supernatural become real: "The death-fires danced at night; the water, like a witch's oils, burnt green, and blue and white" (Part II). The reader can visualize the death-fires in all their terrifying intensity.



Symbolism is another notable aspect of Coleridge's creativity. The Albatross, for instance, is a complex symbol in the poem. Initially seen as an omen of good luck, it takes on deeper significance as Coleridge compares it to a Christian soul:

At length did cross an Albatross  
Through the fog it came;  
As if it had been a Christian soul,  
We hailed it in God's name. (Part I)

However, when the Mariner kills it "with my cross-bow I shot the Albatross," the act is initially interpreted by the crew as a crime and then as a justified killing. On its part, nature with its supernatural powers, reacts against this man-made "interpretation." The Mariner's suffering and the calamity and death of the crew is indication that nature has not taken this crime lightly considering. Nature reacts and challenges the crew leaving the Mariner to wallow in his guilt.

Finally, the theme of creation serves as a moralistic motif within the poem, guiding readers towards displaying reverence and affection for God's creation. Following the killing of the Albatross, the mariner spends seven days and nights alone. Consumed by grief, he laments his solitude upon the vast sea, then acknowledges his responsibility for the death of the sailors, and gradually awakens to the magnificence of the universe. Notably, even water snakes, previously perceived as menacing creatures, are now viewed as divine entities worthy of admiration. The Mariner exclaims:

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. (Part IV)

Remarkably, when he offers a blessing to the water snakes, the Albatross symbolically falls from his neck. A. M Buchan, in his essay "The Sad Wisdom of the Mariner" (1969), contends that the Albatross's symbolic descent into the sea signifies the Mariner's realization that mysterious and omnipotent spirits govern his destiny, and that it is they who mark the commencement of his spiritual release and journey into purgatory where his spiritual wonder expands (p.98). Furthermore, Buchan posits that since the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross, though intentional was unpremeditated, and he emphasizes the need for the Mariner to take responsibility for his inexplicable actions in order to commence the process of atonement for his sins (p.97). In reality, though the Mariner is compelled to repeatedly recount his story as part of his penance, he can neither find nor achieve complete redemption.

## **V. Conclusion**

To Conclude, Coleridge's vivid imagination has orchestrated the harmonious flow of these symbols, blending them seamlessly with the reality of the human condition and his religious fervor. *The Rime* demonstrates how symbols can affect the senses, and the poet's creative use of the sun and moon,

creatures, the sea, rivers, storms, starlight, and the Albatross in a rhythmic and symbolic repertoire lends the poem an air of uncanny spirituality. The extent of the Mariner's suffering for killing an innocent, harmless being for no apparent reason, and the prospect of going through a "Death-in-Life" experience projects a sense of fear and foreboding in the readers and serves to encourage and strengthen ethical responsibility toward God's creatures. Furthermore, an examination of the poem's symbolism, language, themes, and subject matter, reveals Coleridge's brilliance and his own creativity as a romantic poet and philosopher. In the end, though it is nature that restores the Mariner's faith, what cures or relieves his inner turmoil or sense of guilt and shame, is the repetitive narration of his story to any stranger he happens to come across and convince him/her to listen, as he did with the wedding guest. In this respect, it could be said that Coleridge seems to have discovered a temporary cure to his predicament concerning morality and religion, and this is where he adds another dimension to the implications of romantic literature.

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