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Coleridge's Use of Symbolism in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner

The greatness of a poet chiefly lies in his use of symbolism and imagery. Romantic poets have used different symbols to convey their attitude to life and nature, for they believe in a transcendental reality, an ideal world beyond the world of reality. Coleridge deals with the supernatural aspects of life as well as nature and to do so he has made extensive use of symbolism in his poems.

An analysis of his celebrated poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" reveals that he has made the whole poem a symbol of life itself. The poet through his use of various symbols has produced the presence of two worlds: the conventional everyday world and the mysterious world beyond that which is more real to him. In the opening lines, Coleridge has introduced the entirely different personalities, the wedding guest as a symbol of the conventional everyday world and the mysterious transcendental world. The Sea-Lord Albatross symbolizes some moral values: hospitality and gratitude. It also becomes a symbol of life itself in the Mariner's lifeless world. The act of killing involving the crime of the Mariner symbolizes man's violation of moral values. The poet's deliberate silence about the motive of the crime symbolizes the essential irrationality of the human mind.

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However, the use of the supernatural reveals the greatest symbol of the mystery of life and the unseen powers controlling human destiny. Coleridge has used a number of supernatural elements which are rationally inexplicable, e.g. the seraph band, the specter ship with the 'Life in Death' woman, the unknown spirits following them etc. All these happenings suggest the eternal mystery of life, symbolizing the puzzling aspects of life which contribute to the transcendental world of Coleridge. Other objects of nature like the sun and the moon are used as powerful symbols in the poem. The sun symbolizes the rational world which is benevolent in the beginning of the voyage but later becomes malicious after the commitment of the crime. The moon symbolizes the divine spirit which remains indifferent to the Mariner's ordeal' keeping to her own course throughout the voyage. The whole dualism of the poem: the sun and the moon, the powers of water and air, the act of killing and that of blessing, the state of solitude and that of 'goodly company', the nightmare and the awakening, the drowning and the resurfacing symbolizes some kind of redemption of reconciliation. The two voices, whose conversation the Mariner hears subconsciously, symbolizes the spiritual and psychological part of the Mariner's mind. Since he is not essentially evil-minded, he is conscious of his crime and the need for repentance. He hears subconsciously: "The man hath penance done/ and penance more will do".

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It is to be noted that Coleridge's continuous use of contrasts of bright and somber, colors of silence and noise of joy and sorrow of light and darkness etc. symbolizes his own view of light which is a mixture of the opposite. With the employment of all these symbols, the poet has given a new meaning to the archetype pattern of the main fall and his repentance, leading to partial redemption.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a highly symbolic poem, written in the form of a ballad, dealing with certain psychological states of a sailor, his sun, and redemption. However, the poem involves a paradox, for the wedding ceremony symbolizes the beginning of a new life of the two united souls, but the Mariner has reached the end of his life when nothing remains for him except the past memories of sorrow, sin, and repentance. If the Mariner's voyage is regarded as a symbolic journey of life, we note that he also started it happily like the newly married couple. The storm at sea drew the ship to the land of mist. Here 'mist' symbolizes moral confusion from which the Mariner and other sailor were suffering. Some critics have described the bird itself as Christ. So the killing of the bird by the Mariner represents the sin of crucifixion, enabling the bird to embrace the death of a martyr, though his act of killing, the Mariner has become a sinner, inviting the inevitable sufferings of life.

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Thus, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is essentially a symbolic poem and Coleridge craftsmanship and dealing with different symbols reveals his poetic genius at its best.

The Albatross

The albatross is a complicated symbol within the poem. Historically, albatross were seen by sailors as omens of good luck, and initially the albatross symbolizes this to the sailors when it appears just as a wind picks up to move the ship. Further, birds in general were often seen as having the ability to move between the earthly and spiritual realms, and this albatross in particular—with its habit of appearing from out of the fog—seems to be both natural and supernatural. Thus the albatross can be seen as symbolizing the connection between the natural and spiritual worlds, a connection that the rest of the poem will show even more clearly, and it can further be seen as a symbol of the sublime (the unearthly bird) as it sports with the mundane (the ship). With the Mariner's killing of the bird, the symbol becomes more complicated still. First, the killing of the innocent bird, and the Mariner's line that "Instead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung," suggests that the Albatross can be read as a symbol of Christ, with the Mariner as the betraying Judas (particularly as the Albatross is killed by a cross-bow). The dead albatross, also, can be read more generally as a mark of sin.

But as all these symbols build up around the albatross, it also starts to be possible to see the albatross as a symbol of resistance to symbolism: a symbol that is not a symbol of nature but rather something that Coleridge has created to be similar to nature in the sense of its complexity, its resistance to being easily analyzed or

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pinned down. The poem insists that nature is something to be revered just as God is revered, but that, like God, nature is beyond both the mastery and comprehension of mankind. And in the albatross, with its multiplying potential symbols, Coleridge has created something similar. This idea is further supported by the fact that disaster strikes the Mariner and the sailors precisely after they “interpret” the albatross. The Mariner does so by killing it: what was once so many things, natural and supernatural, has been reduced to just being dead. And the crew then interpret the Mariner’s act as first a crime, and then a justified killing—at which point nature and the supernatural rear up against them, a literal reaction against these men’s “interpretation.”

The Eyes

Other symbols and many of the themes in the poem exert their presence through the eyes. Firstly, the Mariner holds the Wedding Guest with his story, but also with his “glittering eye.” The eye then symbolizes both a means of control and a means of communication, which makes sense given the spellbinding power of storytelling in the poem. When words fail, humans communicate through their eyes. This point is also exemplified by the silent curses the Sailors give the Mariner when they are too thirsty to speak. This form of communication is powerful, direct, and primal, and it is also continued and pushed into the realm of the supernatural and sublime when the communicative gaze continues even after the sailors’ deaths.

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But eyes do not only symbolize a means of primal, ineffably communication between humans. They also symbolize the means of communication between humans and the natural world, and through it, God. It is through the eyes that we observe God's creatures, nature, and the sublime: the Mariner observes the Albatross, the Sun and Moon, the sublime, and the rest of the natural world with the power of sight. Some of the most terrifying moments of the poem are given through the means of sight and the eyes, for example, when the Mariner spies a ship and realizes its skeletal, ghostly nature as it approaches. The communication signified here is indicating that penance or punishment is coming, but the communication that the eye symbolizes and enables can also carry a message of salvation, as it is the sight of the radiant beauty of the swimming snakes that allows the Mariner to realize his error.

In another way, then, the eye can symbolize the limitations of the poem and of storytelling itself. The Mariner (and through him Coleridge) can use words to communicate the glory of God and the beauty of the world, but this communication will always be indirect. By seeing, we can take one step closer to God, to an appreciation of the sublime in nature, and to understanding for ourselves the lessons which the poem seeks to impart.

The Sun and Moon

The Sun and Moon symbolize the competing influences on the Mariner's journey and on the world. The two compete with each other, at times embodying the forces of both the natural and supernatural world. The sun is associated with blood, heat, dryness, and the thirst that ultimately kills the Sailors. It symbolizes both the majesty and the terror of the vast natural world, as it is described with sublime beauty and is

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also used to tell which direction the ship is traveling. The moon, as it is responsible for shaping the tides, symbolizes the supernatural and divine influences on nature. We can note that the ghostly ship of Death and Life-in-Death is superimposed over the sun, before the sun sets and is replaced by the moon. It is then by moonlight that the next stage of penance and the Mariner's spiritual awakening take place. But it is this cyclic process and competition between the sun and moon that, together, symbolizes the unity of God's creation, divine influence, and the cyclic process of sin, penance, and absolution that Christians experience.