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Coleridge's Treatment of Supernatural

The eighteenth century is known to be the age of reason with a characteristic bias for rationalism in thought and literature. But even in this century the fascination the human mind feels for the weird and mysterious could not be fully overcome. Towards its closing years writers like Horace Walpole, Mrs Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and Monk Lewis popularised a special kind of novel known as Gothic romance. These romances depicted the life in the middle ages. Their scenes were invariably laid in haunted castles and dilapidated buildings. They aimed at producing supernatural awe and terror in the minds of the readers by creating scenes of darkness and night, by taking their characters to the grave of the dead in the churchyard, by showing supernatural powers dominating human life, and by including incredible scenes of magic and mystery. When Coleridge started writing, the cult of the supernatural that formed the basis of the Gothic romance was already on the decline, in fact, it was practically dead. But lured by its strangeness and discovering in it vast possibilities of exploitation, Coleridge gave it a new prominence in his poetry. But whereas, with its emphasis on the inclusion of ghastly, blood-curdling incidents that would make the flesh creep, the conventional literature dealing with the supernatural tended to be a little factitious and even silly; Coleridge made his poetry not only convincing and exciting but also a positive criticism of life. Coleridge succeeded where the others had failed because he treated the supernatural as a subordinate element in a wider scheme of human experience and secondly, unlike the other writers who had cultivated this creed as a fashion but

had no belief in it, Coleridge wrote with full conviction.

→ Scene Set in Distant Times and Remote places

The three important poems in which Coleridge has made use of the supernatural are *The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*. It is significant that in all the three poems, Coleridge takes us to distant times and remote places. *The Ancient Mariner* narrates the experience of an ancient mariner voyaging around polar regions in unknown seas. *Christabel* takes us back to the Middle Ages, to the old moated castles with barons and bards. In *Kubla Khan*, the scene is laid in the oriental city of Xanadu, in forests as 'ancient as the hills'.

"Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea."

This remoteness of scene in all the three poems is quite deliberate. Medieval times are traditionally associated with magic and witchcraft. The appearance of an evil spirit in *Sir Leoline Castle* does not strike us as improbable nor - do we feel any inappropriateness in *Kubla Khan's* hearing ancestral voices prophesying war amidst the tumultuous noises heard from the fountain as well as the caverns measureless to man. The moment the poet effects temporal and spatial remoteness, the rigorous logic governing the familiar world of reality is suspended and the poet feels free to create a new logic in a comparatively new world.

The Supernatural Events in 'The Ancient Mariner'

In the poem 'The Ancient Mariner' Coleridge used supernatural events which begins with the appearance of the spectre ship with its crew, Death and life in Death, and ends with the leaving of the corpses by the troop of the angelic spirits. In the very beginning Coleridge transports us to distant times and remote places with vast weird possibilities. "It is an ancient mariner" he tells us in the very first line of the poem. The word ancient immediately suggests middle Ages when an atmosphere of magic and mystery was ripe all around and when supernatural occurrences were not dismissed as the figments of a feverish imagination but were believed to be really true. And the Mariner is not moving about in any familiar place but is voyaging around polar regions in unknown seas where anything might happen. Before any supernatural elements is introduced, the Mariner does not forget to tell us:

" We were the first that ever burst
In to that silent sea."

Thus cut off from the everybody life, the Ancient Mariner's story gets free from the rigorous logic governing the world of reality and can follow its own laws without unduly straining our credulity.

The Supernatural elements are not abruptly introduced into the poem. It is very difficult to locate exactly where the natural ends and the supernatural begins or to distinguish the natural from the supernatural in a particular description. The storm-blast is represented as a gigantic vulture and we feel that it is not like a lifeless thing but bright and red like God's own head.

In The Ancient Mariner, Coleridge has

rigidly excluded the conventional, crude presentation of the supernatural elements. His depiction is suggestive and tentatively indeterminate, exercising an effect of vague mystery. There are no horrifying details in the description of the Nightmare Life-in-Death.

" Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold;
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life in Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

(Lines 190-194)

This is not a full description of Life-in-Death. Perhaps a full description was not possible. Nor was it the poet's aim to attempt it. The poet wants us to grasp the dreadfulness of Life-in-Death through this effect on the Mariner's mind. This method has been repeatedly used in the poem to avoid horrible details. At the end of Part III, two hundred sailors drop down dead one by one, cursing the Mariner with their eyes:

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." (Line 212-215)

Here again the poet does not provide any ugly details and leaves the entire scene to our imagination. This method of suggesting supernatural horrors is very different indeed from the practice of the novelists of the school of terror like Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. It is also worth noting that even when Coleridge has to introduce supernatural beings, he does not introduce ghosts, he animates the bodies of the dead crew with a troop of spirits blest and avoids all gruesome details:

" They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose

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Not spake, nor moved their eyes,
It had been strange even in a dream
To have seen those dead men rise."

C.M. Bowra observes that Coleridge has exploited some characteristics of a dream to make his poem look convincing. In his book, *The Romantic Imagination*, Bowra writes, "He uses the atmosphere of dreams to accustom us to his special world, and then he proceeds to create freely within his chosen limits." In dreams, we have one experience at a time in a very concentrated form and since the critical self is not at work, the effect is more powerful and more haunting than most effects when we are awake. *The Ancient Mariner* shows many qualities of a dream. It moves in abrupt stages, each of which has its own single, dominating character.

Another very important feature of Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural is a very clever and subtle blending of the natural and supernatural. Indeed the two are so indistinguishably fused with each other that it becomes difficult to locate where the one ends and the other begins. Who will say with any definiteness whether the bloody sun, no bigger than the moon, standing right above the mast in a hot and copper sky, the death-fires dancing at night and the water burning green, and blue and white like a witch's oil constitute natural or supernatural phenomena?

Thus Coleridge has beautifully used supernatural events in his poems. Today, no doubt, ghosts and goblins no longer capture our imagination still we are able to enjoy Coleridge's poetry and appreciate its relevance to us.

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