"Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink": The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale

Megan Lowe
Northeastern State University, lowe18@nsuok.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.mackseysymposium.org/virtual2020

Part of the Other Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Other English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Lowe, Megan, ""Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink": The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale" (2020). 2020 JHU Richard Macksey National Undergraduate Humanities Research Symposium. 64.
https://www.mackseysymposium.org/virtual2020/all/presentations/64

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by JHU Macksey Symposium Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2020 JHU Richard Macksey National Undergraduate Humanities Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of JHU Macksey Symposium Commons.
“Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink”:

_The Rime of the Ancient Mariner_ as Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale

The most significant relationship humankind participates in is the relationship with the natural world. The planet provides us with the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the paper on which we print our beloved texts. This month, people from around the globe celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, though to call it a celebration is a stretch. What this day has come to symbolize does not involve cheers and festivity. Instead, it serves as a sobering reminder that humanity’s most beneficial relationship is not _mutually_ beneficial; the relentless devastation of the planet makes this clear. Through the callous killing of the Albatross and the calamity that follows, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s _The Rime of the Ancient Mariner_ demonstrates the disastrous effects of humanity’s dominion. As such, it serves as a cautionary tale, showing readers what happens when the natural world is abused, as well as a confirmation that humans should work to live in harmony with nature—which is the only way both members of this relationship can survive.

The superiority of man over all other animals is a belief that is as injurious as it is popular, and the Mariner exercises this belief by killing the Albatross. Through this cruel action, the Mariner not only ends the life of an innocent creature, but he brings about the ruin of himself and his companions as well. In the same way, humanity is killing planet Earth. Animal agriculture, pollution, deforestation, and the overexploitation of natural resources are proving detrimental to the planet and to all who reside upon it, including humankind. Last year, an assessment performed by the United Nations revealed that, unless the destruction of the planet comes to a grinding halt, many of the one million species facing extinction will be pushed over
the brink in the next thirty years. While this is not the first time the catastrophic effects of humanity’s mistreatment of Earth have been studied, *The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* reveals that the fate of humankind is bound to the fate of the planet and that both are in grave and imminent danger. Not only is the rate of species extinction across the globe currently “at least tens to hundreds of times higher” than the average has been over the past ten million years, but it is accelerating, causing the destruction of many of Earth’s ecosystems (Díaz 24). These ecosystems provide us with natural resources that are crucial for the health of the human species, such as a wide variety of nutritious foods, medicines, and clean drinking water, and “their decline thus threatens a good quality of life” for us all (Díaz 22).

While it is the Mariner alone who kills the Albatross, his shipmates are not entirely innocent. At first, they adore the seabird and consider its presence to be a positive omen, even going so far as to “hail[] it in God’s name” (Coleridge 66). When learning of the Mariner’s murderous actions, they become angry and cry out against him, calling him a wretch. However, after the fog clears and the “glorious Sun” returns, they justify the Mariner’s actions, saying it must have been the Albatross that “brought the fog and mist” (Coleridge 98-100). Even though they did not actively take part in killing the bird, they still become complicit in the crime; because they have seemingly benefited from the cruelty, they condone it, forgetting how much they once loved the Albatross and losing sight of their own morality. Thus, they have made themselves accomplices in the murder, thereby dooming themselves to a terrible death. Coleridge shows that this is what happens when one turns a blind eye to crimes against nature. The blood is not only on the hands of those performing the evil acts, and the ramifications will affect everyone.

Though the fog has cleared, and a fair breeze has arrived in its place to ensure smooth
sailing for the Mariner and his shipmates, it is not long before their vessel becomes “As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean” (Coleridge 117-18). During this standstill, the men grow increasingly dehydrated; though they are surrounded by water, it is saltwater and therefore not suitable for human consumption. The misery they endure as a result spurs the poem’s most famous lines: “Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink” (Coleridge 121-22). The Mariner laments their dire circumstances, which can be seen as consequences of his causing the Albatross to suffer and die. In the same way, while the UN’s report does say that “human-engineered water treatment facilities” could provide clean drinking water, it makes sure to underscore the fact that the infrastructure would be not only difficult but expensive to build and maintain, and it would “fail to provide synergistic benefits” associated with healthy ecosystems, such as access to diverse food sources (Díaz 22). Though, for now, humanity might be sailing smoothly, it is only a matter of time before “the sails drop[] down,” and we too will be threatened with a lack of clean drinking water (Coleridge 107). When that day comes, mankind’s suffering could be as great as that depicted in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

When the Mariner is cursed, and his men are killed, he is left “Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea” (Coleridge 232-33). He learns, however, that he is not entirely alone, for his relationship with the snakes moving alongside his ship transforms. Earlier in the tale, he mentions “slimy things” moving in the ocean, and it is clear that he does not see these creatures in a positive light (Coleridge 125). However, after his men drop dead as a result of being visited by a ghost ship bearing Death and Life-in-Death, the Mariner notes that “a thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did [he]” (Coleridge 238-39). By saying this, he begins to realize the connection between himself and the sea creatures. Soon after, when he sees the water snakes swimming alongside his ship again, he calls them “happy living things” as a
gushing “spring of love” overflows from his heart (Coleridge 282-84). He has finally seen their beauty and subsequently blesses them, after which the Albatross falls from his neck, effectively breaking his curse. Of this incident, Harold Bloom writes that the Mariner is saved “by naturalizing himself in his surroundings and finding a joy that will intimate the one life he shares with the creatures of the great deep” (210). The Mariner has finally recognized the tremendous interconnection that exists between himself and the natural world.

After sharing his terrifying and eye-opening experiences, the Mariner’s final words to the Wedding-Guest are in the form of a moral regarding man and nature. “He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small,” the Mariner imparts, “For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (Coleridge 614-17). While some critics, such as Bloom, have questioned the authenticity of this moral, Pyeaam Abbasi points to evidence in Coleridge’s writings showing that these are sentiments the poet had himself. For instance, three years before writing The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge wrote a poem called Religious Musings, in which he outlines his faith. In this poem, Coleridge writes that God, “with no partial gaze / Views all creation; and he loves it all” (qtd. in Abbasi 9). It is clear, then, that the moral in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is based off of this poem, inspired by Coleridge’s own beliefs, which lends greater credibility to its message.

Even though the curse has been broken, the Mariner still lives a horrible existence. He has seen the error of his ways, and he evangelizes to others regarding the moral that he has realized, but his “life remains a failure” (Abbasi 13). This is because, while the Mariner understands he was wrong to kill the Albatross and now sees the great connection between himself and all living beings, he cannot undo what he has done; just as the Albatross cannot come back to life, “the violation cannot be fully recovered” (Abbasi 13). In the same way, if
humanity continues on the path of destruction, depleting Earth of its natural resources until the
planet is eventually annihilated, the consequences of this cannot be overturned simply because
the errors have been recognized. One day, it will be too late, and no understanding of the wrongs
committed will change the fact that humanity has sealed its own fate and signaled the end of its
own existence. To that end, Coleridge’s Mariner serves as a harbinger of what is in store for us if
we do not change our ways.

After the Mariner delivers his moral, he leaves the Wedding-Guest to himself. The very
end of the poem is centered around this listener, who has become a “sadder and a wiser man” as
a result of the encounter (Coleridge 624). This is because, if the Mariner can be seen as mankind
that is currently heading toward destruction, the Wedding-Guest could represent future
generations who must endure the same fate. After all, the Mariner is described as being one
“Whose beard with age is hoar” (Coleridge 619), while the Wedding-Guest is compared to a
“three years’ child” (Coleridge 15). Learning of the killing of the planet at the hands of previous
generations would be heartbreaking; just thinking of this conversation taking place is
heartbreaking. Because of this, we must cherish and protect the planet, not only for ourselves,
but also for our children, for our grandchildren, and for the future of the human species.

Like the Mariner, it is time for us to fully recognize the damage we have inflicted upon
the natural world. We have but one home, one Earth, one partner in this most crucial of all
relationships. Instead of continually taking from the planet, we should work to give back in
return, and not just on one day of the year. We should invest in this relationship every day in
order to avoid causing the suffering of countless creatures and generations to come. Otherwise,
we will destroy planet Earth and, ultimately, ourselves. While it was too late for the Mariner, it is
not too late for us. The crossbow is loaded and aimed at the Albatross, but we have not yet let the
bolt fly. If we heed Coleridge’s warning, taking the Mariner’s moral to heart by opting to lower our weapon and preserve the natural world, we can save the planet, and we can save ourselves.
Works Cited


