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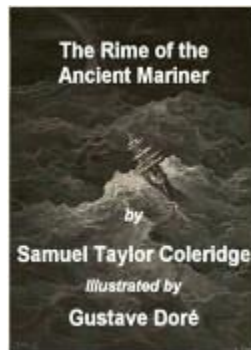
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Coleridge's Exploitation of the Willing Suspension of Disbelief in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Md. Nasir Uddin, B.A. (Hons), M.A.



Abstract

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Coleridge's Exploitation of the Willing Suspension of Disbelief in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

This paper attempts an analysis of Coleridge's famous concept of *The Willing Suspension of Disbelief* in the context of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". This concept used by Coleridge was intended to help his readers understand the attempt taken by him to bring them to fantasy land in *Lyrical Ballads*. It has established a significant way of creating the romantic spirit of wonder, teaching one how to treat the supernatural so as to make the readers get so very involved in the story that they respond to it with a realistic sense of suspense. The discussion here will be limited to how Coleridge in this particular poem has managed to capture the faith of his readers, only to proceed to turn this faith to a casual compromise between fantasy and realism.

Introduction

Norman Holland in his *Dynamics of Literary Response* suggests that we employ our "imaginative involvement" in a literary work in an "as if" process (Holland 63). According to him, there are basic artistic conventions that help the readers or audience to become involved with the imagination and the work. The entry into fantasy stimulated by the masterpiece or entertainment is not completely in the work itself; rather, the fantasies come from both the readers (or the audience) and the work, he says. The reader (or audience) is both reader (or audience) and author of fantasy in that "the literary text provides us with a fantasy which we interject experiencing it as though it were our own supplying our own associations to it" (Holland 311).

Coleridge has tried to express in his poetry the influence of the unearthly potent powers which he believes are at work behind the visible. Like the primitive, he accepts that the world is full of spirits, invisible agencies of good or evil and that our life is ruled by them though they cannot be fully understood. The concept of this supernaturalism is thus evoked by Wordsworth and Coleridge during their epoch making discussion on the Quantock Hills in the summer of 1797. It is agreed that Wordsworth will deal with the natural, with ordinary life while Coleridge will deal with, as mentioned in *Literaria Biographia*, "persons and characters supernatural, or, at least, romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith".

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Coleridge's Treatment of Nature

Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" represents a triumph of the gothic style. Here Coleridge attempts to offer extraordinary events in a credible manner. He presents each situation in a concrete form. Even though these events are unnatural, they originate from natural elements and therefore, they are to be considered real.

Nature is not simply a source of joy for Coleridge, his contemplation of nature is also accompanied by awareness and fear of its mystery. His Christian faith makes him aware of nature's influence over man who is bound to respect the divine creator who made it. For him, the spirits of nature are the instruments of God and they derive their plastic power from Him. His position is that of a pantheist (not really Christian), asserting one life or soul within us and nature. His poem "The Eolian Harp" manifests this attitude:

O the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere—

(Coleridge 419)

Treatment of Time and Space

Willing suspension of disbelief means the suspension of the analytical function of the mind by the reader himself, as a preparation for believing things he is reading. So, this takes place chiefly on the part of the reader. The romantics had a strange and strong fascination for the unknown, the distant. In "Kubla Khan" we have seen how the poet has laid the scene of action in the remote and unknown Xanadu, in those semi-mythical ages when Kubla Khan is supposed to have ruled, but of which we have no distinct proof. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", too, the willing suspension of disbelief is achieved through these artistic devices, namely, remoteness of space and time.

The action of the poem is laid first in the distant and unfamiliar Polar region, and then in an equally unknown Tropics. So whatever happens there has more acceptability than those that could happen in a known atmosphere. The use of the ballad style and that of question-answer method have provoked an atmosphere of other time. The word "Ancient" used at the beginning

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stands for the Mariner's age as well as the distant past out of which he seems to emerge Ghost-like into the present. The citation to the "Cross bow", the "Vesper", the "Shriving Hermit", the "Prayer to Mary Queen" all speak of the Middle Ages. The narrator grows upon us as a character, apart from telling the tale as a result of which the events are dramatically conceived. This dramatic form gains a resemblance of truth for supernatural happenings.

Realistic Setting

More importantly, when the speaker utters:

"He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years child:
The Mariner hath his will" (Coleridge 423)

it is suggestive of something more. Coleridge's mastery in this poem starts from here. The Mariner with his strange "glittering eye" has at first turned the status of the stranger into that of a three year old child. So the Guest is now psychologically vulnerable to fantasy. He is no more in a position to accept or reject things on the basis of logic and therefore, "he cannot choose but hear" and believe.

The supernatural cast is thrown into relief and made convincing by its realistic setting. In the opening scene, the Mariner stops the Wedding Guest. The intention is that at first the familiar precedents are followed in appealing to a kind of horrified fear.

The vividness of the description of the beginning of the journey helps to believe the fantastic happenings that are to follow. The friends and relatives have come to see off the sailors and passengers and wish them a prosperous voyage – this includes a sense of realism. The Mariner's ship is driven toward the South Pole where no living thing is to be seen other than the sounds of cracking ice. :

"And ice, mast high, came floating by
As green as emerald." (Coleridge 424)

Eerie Mystery

Nature still retains her essential qualities, though this time it is charged with eerie mystery. We may wonder how Ice can be "as green as emerald". As we proceed, we see that at

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noon the sun looks “bloody” in a “hot and copper sky” which is “no bigger than the Moon”. Moreover, the sea is “glittering white” by night, the calm sea with rotting smell appears “like a witch’s oils, burnt green and blue and white” – all these contribute to a dreadful mystery. The movement of the moon and the stars across the sky is a normal phenomenon, but the way the epithets are used to describe them, makes the difference. Coleridge knows that a ship in moonlight casts a shadow and that colors in phosphorescent waters become vivid with the increase of darkness:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire (Coleridge 430).

This is quite natural in the Tropics, but the description is such that it haunts us with some supernatural terror. But Coleridge’s aim is not to arouse terror or wonder, but to show the strange, uncanny experiences of an individual who is placed under such unusual circumstances.

The Natural and the Unnatural: A Unique Blending

The sailors are dead. But their bodies have not decomposed or given out any foul smell; their look still retains the anger and pain in their eyes for the Mariner – What an unnatural sight it is! :

“The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
Nor rot nor reek did they:
They look with which they looked on me
Had never passed away.
...
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man’s eye !
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse—
And yet I could not die” (Coleridge 429).

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Such description is believable only when we feel the mental condition of the Mariner at that moment. A man placed at that situation is bound to be spell-bound and lose the conscious activities of mind. So being surrounded by a number of dead bodies whose death-cause is none but him, the Mariner may obviously be led to think and receive out of an extreme sense of guilt, sheer disgust and vengeance in their dead eyes. The sea described as “rotting” thus stands for the Mariner’s rotting soul.

The coming of the Skeleton ship seems to be a small point, then as it advances a mist, then a certain figure – this detail is also out and out realistic. But this realistic description is blended with an utter supernatural element as soon as the coming is accomplished. Now it is a woman with “red lips” and “free looks” and a dead body on the boat. Here, nothing supernatural do we notice in the description of the physical appearance of these two. They are quite normal like human beings, having the same sort of human figures and organs. They are not shown as having five or ten eyes and five or ten hands and a face so gothic as to create fear. But the supernatural lies in what they do in this gloomy atmosphere. She starts gambling with “the death” and with sudden joy “whistles thrice” which is of course unrealistic and horror provoking. While the Mariner’s ship is standing still due to the want of wind, the skeleton ship approaches without the help of any wind. It is also awe-provoking.

No Ghostly Figure

So what we see is that Coleridge has not invested any ghostly figure to serve his purpose, but the atmosphere is set so masterfully planned that it touches our mind with a feeling of supernaturalism. The passengers fell dead one after another without creating any sound of pain. This is unnatural, too. But we are informed that they were too thirsty to speak, even to move their lips, and so we accept this incongruity. Humphrey House’s interpretation regarding this mood of blending is noteworthy: “In the poem as a whole, a deliberate contrast is certainly presented between the background of the Wedding Guest and the Mariner’s tale. The interpretations of the Wedding Guest are meant to point this contrast. His constant fear is that the Mariner is a ghost who has come back from the dead, or even himself some kind of infernal spirit. The contrast is not so much between two types of personality, the normal conventional and the abnormal adventurer, but between two aspects of reality, and two potentialities of experience,

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the visible bodily world of human beings marrying and giving in marriage and an invisible world of spirits and the dead, where quite a different system of values is to be learnt. The effect of the interruptions of the Wedding Guest is to show how these two kinds of reality are always co-existent: the total effect of the poem is to show them interpenetrating (House, 180)”.

Psychological Journey with Humanistic Approach

This poem must be rendered psychological and humane. Coleridge’s supernatural is entirely subjective and a psychic phenomenon. Its presence is not seen by the eye, it is felt by the mind through the agitation that excites the mind. The realm of “Life-in-Death is the consciousness of being abandoned both by God and Nature and the utter inability to do anything for one’s own salvation. It is a complete paralysis of the will, symbolized by the motionlessness of the ship; And in that state of fixity, the Mariner envies the moon and stars for their steady progress through the heavens . . . What happens to him when he blesses the water-snakes in the tropical calm is a psychic rebirth- a rebirth that must at times happen to all men and all creatures unless they are to dry up in a living death” (Hough, 61- 63). He is relieved of physical punishment, but not the spiritual one and therefore, he is to soothe his suffering heart by continuing his preaching. “He has seen the truth, but the truth does not set him free” (Bloom 211). The woodland hermit stands as a symbol of eternal peace to be obtained through penance and humility. The Mariner is privileged with the status of a tragic hero whose Hubris is either his “pride” or his “ignorance” that has resulted in ignoring the fact that everything as a part of nature is of equal importance to God and is to be cherished for its own sake. We are touched to observe his agonies and feel that what happens to him may happen to us as well. Coleridge’s mastery lies in that he has properly utilized this basic and universal humanity in attaining acceptability for all those unnatural happenings that turn natural with this helpless forsaken guilt-ridden tragic figure. C. M. Bowra in *Romantic Imagination* concludes his discussion very emphatically: “His poem creates not a negative but a positive condition, a state of faith which is complete and satisfying because it is founded on realities in the living world and in the human heart”.

Dream Quality

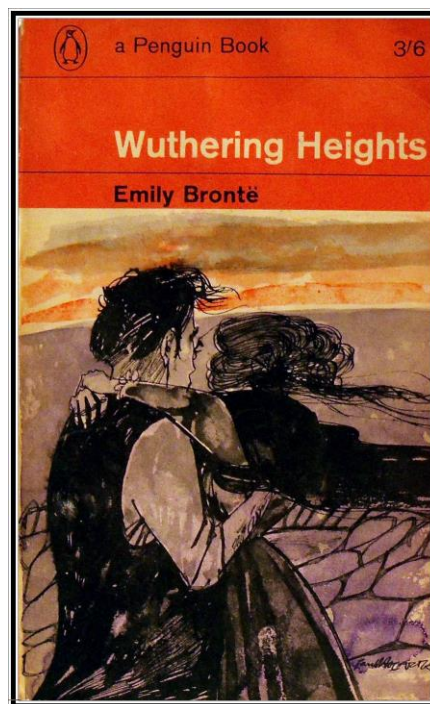
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Besides, Coleridge exploits the characteristics of dream in creating the willing suspension of disbelief successfully. The physical and psychological stress and collapse in the Mariner, parched off and excommunicated for such a long time, is unavoidable. The Mariner's mind, filled with imaginary fear of the curse of the dead, is sure to be led to illusions and hallucinations; the rational self is to be kept at bay and actions must fail to maintain logical connection. Taking this opportunity, Coleridge has associated a drowsy dreamy atmosphere with the incidents of the approach of the Skeleton ship, the standing up and groaning of the dead bodies, the spiritual voice, the angels, the hermit and things that follow, and the result he gets is that the poetic truth is easily achieved. While keeping all these in mind, the readers ignore all "ifs" and "buts" and fall deeper in love with the going on of the story with excitement renewed.

A Comparative Study – Coleridge and Emily Brontë



Following this narrative technique of Coleridge, Emily Brontë has also skillfully naturalized the supernatural in her *Wuthering Heights*, in making the action of the story credible.

The estate of Wuthering Heights, the wild weather and the dangerous moors all combine to create a truly gothic setting in which even the city dwellers will be haunted by spirits. Emily

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Bronte makes perfect use of the unnatural in evoking within the readers' minds a powerful sense of dread, apprehension and pain.

The appearance of the bloody apparition of Catherine may well be a dream or something more, but the graphic nature of the account evokes a sense of unearthly dread. It is made clear that Heathcliff, the protagonist, is convinced of the existence of ghosts and the idea that Catherine's spirit remains present at the Heights. So we don't question, rather feel pity for such an outcome of his frustration in love. We don't question the accounts in the final pages of ghostly sightings of Heathcliff and Catherine either. Bronte believes not only in the immortality of the soul but in the indestructibility of love as well. Just as death does not kill the soul, it cannot destroy love. Death in the world of Emile Bronte is a gateway to a better and fuller state of existence. And so does it become to the readers as they proceed, especially, observing the extremity of passion both Catherine and Heathcliff have proved they have for each other. We are left with a disagreeable feeling, but don't regret the experience of having read through such a clash of human souls.

Bronte's humanization succeeds in making us sad for such a 'devil', "ghoulish", "goblin", "judas", "satan" and fiend" whose eyes are the "clouded windows of hell". The paranormal brutality shown by Heathcliff paves the way for the readers to the acceptance of the paranormal punishment imposed upon him. Heathcliff's origin is mysterious, he leaves Wuthering Heights mysteriously, returns mysteriously, begins to behave mysteriously since his return and even dies mysteriously. All these constitute a preparation for the readers to withdraw logical connection while going through these thrills followed by thrills.

Conclusion

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is the most vital and imaginative achievement of Coleridge's poetry (Bloom 207). Modern readers may get the taste of magic realism while suspending the disbelief, because in magic realism the possible and the impossible are blended in the similar fashion. Coleridge succeeds in keeping the readers in suspense till the end of the story. We always remain worried whether the Mariner manages to escape or falls into greater trouble just as the Wedding Guest worries if the mariner fails to survive in his tale because this will ultimately suggest that he is now listening to a ghost. And it is because both the readers and

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the Guest begin to believe the action of the tale told by the Mariner that the suspense develops. And there lies the secret of the beauty of this willing suspension of disbelief.

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