

Postmodern Attributes in “The Rime of Ancient Mariner”

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Abstract

Post-modernism is a knowing modernism, a self-reflexive modernism, a modernism that does not agonise about itself. So postmodernism can be understood in relation to modernism. The Ancient Mariner by S.T. Coleridge is a literary ballad. The refrain of words, lines and sometimes stanza is a special feature of folk ballads. Coleridge makes use of refrain in a subtle way, for emphasis or for reminding us of the essence of a thing. He has frequently employed alliteration, assonance, various rhythms and supernatural elements. In this poem he has built in a large supernatural machinery to draw an effective and purposeful contrast between things natural and things human. Thus, we have in this poem a large variety of imagery which are simply and vividly drawn and the masterly use of imagery is discussed in detail in this paper.

Keywords: *The Rime of Ancient Mariner*, supernatural elements, musical arrangement, psychological aspects, modernity.

Post-modernism is the term used to suggest a reaction or response to modernism in the late twentieth century. So postmodernism can only be understood in relation to Modernism. At its core, Postmodernism rejects that which Modernism champions. While postmodernism seems very much like modernism in many ways, it differs from modernism in its attitude toward a lot of these trends. Modernism, for example, tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history, but presents that fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Postmodernism, in contrast, doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. In literature, it is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc. and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature.

The Ancient Mariner by S.T. Coleridge is a literary ballad. Ballad is one of the earliest forms of literature. Following this age-old tradition Coleridge created a marvelous ballad poem. Here goes a discussion on what have made The Ancient Mariner a perfect ballad.

The refrain of words, lines and sometimes stanza is a special feature of folk ballads. Coleridge makes use of refrain in a subtle way. He makes use of refrain for emphasis or for reminding us of the essence of a thing. In the following lines refrain is clearly meant for emphasis. In the following lines repetition is clearly meant for emphasis:

Water, water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink. (17)

Coleridge has shown great skill in arranging the words of his verses in a melodious manner. For the sake of musical arrangement of words, he has frequently employed alliteration, assonance, and various rhythms. In the following passage he has employed the hissing sounds of “s” to convey the idea of movement in a musical manner.

Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship,
Yet she sailed softly too
Sweetly sweetly blew the breeze
On me alone it blew. (40)

Supernatural element is an essential element of ballads of all description. Coleridge in this poem has built in a large supernatural machinery to draw and effective and purposeful contrast between things natural and things human. The supernatural world or life has logic of its own and comes into action to impose the due punishment. It even controls, influences, and takes advantage of natural elements like the wind, the stars, the rain, the fog and the mist. The Ancient Mariner is also packed with mystery of an awful nature. The Mariner’s ship was becalmed. The ocean begins to rot. Then the ship begins to sail without a tide. The Mariner tells nothing of who he is and little of what he does. In the poem we find him as a helpless soul passing through strange experiences.

The poem is written in short ballad stanzas. Many of them are four-line stanzas. But some are also five-line, or six-line stanzas. The verses are iambic tetrameters followed by iambic trimeters. The rhythms are various. The stanza is the same that occurs in Thomas Percy’s ballads. But Coleridge’s stanza is more polished and finished than Percy’s.

The Ancient Mariner has touches of modernity. The psychological effect in which the poem abounds is something modern and original. In old ballads entire emphasis is laid upon external events. In Ancient Mariner the poet describes not only the external events but also what happens in the mind of the ancient Mariner. Thus we are told that The Ancient Mariner felt extremely fear stricken when the ghost-ship disappeared all of a sudden on the sea.

Fear at my heart at a cup
My life blood seemed to sip. (23)

In the light of the above discussion, it may be concluded that The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is obviously a ballad in its form. The poem has everything- a vivid story, dramatic action,

verbal music, a scenic setting, and mystery. It is a beautiful ballad possessing all the characteristics of a ballad in a more polished and finished form.

The poem "The Ancient Mariner" shows Coleridge's pictorial power and range. In most cases an image has been drawn by the use of a few words only. The poem abounds in Nature-pictures drawn from with a striking economy of words. Many of these nature pictures are richly colored. Here is an exquisite picture of mist, snow and ice-bergs.

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold (11)

The picture of ice bergs is repeated for the sake of emphasis. We have some sound pictures also in the following stanza.

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a sound! (11)

Coleridge portrays the sufferings of the mariner and his shipmates using the imageries of hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell. He also personifies the nature and natural forces. Coleridge uses very vivid imageries in order to intensify the sufferings.

The imagery through which the isolation of the mariners is shown is an audio-visual imagery "the silent sea". Coleridge gives the picture of a lonely silent sea. The ship has been suddenly becalmed.

'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea! (15)

We know that the act of crime makes a being completely isolated lonely. Adam and Eve became lonely inhabitants of the world after their crime. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth became same lonely when they committed a crime. Once we see how lonely the mariners have become after the crime.

We notice a contrast between the two conditions of nature before and after the killing of the bird. Before the sun was "bright" but now it has become "the bloody sun" in a "hot and copper sky".

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon. (15)

The nature continues punishing the mariners. The wind refuses to blow, and the sun's relentless heat chars the men.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breathe nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean (16)

This hot sun makes the mariners thirsty, but they have no drinkable water.

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink. (17)

The mariner lives like Tantalus. They need water badly and it is all around them but it is entirely undrinkable. The throats became "unslaked" and "lips baked" under the hot sun.

We could not speak, no more than if
We had been choked with soot. (17)

The shipmates, in their sore distress, throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner and in sign they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck.

Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung. (18)

The time is weary and long. They have nothing to do but suffer only.

A weary time! a weary time!
How glazed each weary eye,
When looking westward, I beheld
A something in the sky. (19)

A mysterious ship arrives. When the ship is sighted in the distance, the sailors feel happy to think that they will now get water to quench their burning thirst.

I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,
And cried, A sail! a sail! (20)

But in a few moments, they discover the reality of the ship. The crew consists of Death and Life- in- death.

The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thickens man's blood with cold. (22)

Coleridge beautifully depicts the mental suffering of the Mariner under this condition through imagery:

Fear at my heart, as at a cup
My life blood seemed to sip. (23)

The suffering becomes even more painful when all his fellow men dropped down one by one. And the soul of each passes by him with the sound like that of his arrow that killed the Albatross. They dropped down one by one. For seven days and nights the mariner remained alone on the ship.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea! (27)

The dead sailors, who miraculously did not rot, continued to curse him with their open eyes which intensified his inner guilt.

Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die. (28)

His surroundings- the ship, the ocean, and the creatures within it are “rotting” in the heat and sun, but he is the one who is rotten on the inside.

During his lonely days he spent his times by watching the little creatures on the ice. The mariner spontaneously recognizes the beauty of the sea snakes, his heart fills with love for them and he can bless them “unaware”.

A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware: (30)

Only when the mariner is able to appreciate the beauty of the natural world, he is granted the ability to pray. The moment he begins to view the natural world benevolently, his spiritual thirst is quenched. As a sign, the albatross- the burden of sin falls from his neck.

The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea. (31)
It finally rains and his thirst is quenched.
My lips were wet, my throat was cold,
My garments all were dank

The ship suddenly began to move towards the native land of the old sailor. Ultimately the ship reached near the harbor. It sank suddenly and the old sailor was rescued from the disaster.

Thus, we have in this poem a large variety of imagery which are simply and vividly drawn. Almost every phase of sea-scape, land-scape, and cloud-scape is touched upon in this poem. The masterly use of imagery is an important characteristic of the poem.

Works Cited

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