

S.T. Coleridge's Psycho-philosophic and Metaphysical Exploration in *The Ancient Mariner*

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Abstract: "The Ancient Mariner" is the crowning achievement of Romantic Imagination by which Coleridge crossing the barriers of time and space reveals the hidden psycho- philosophic and metaphysical realities of the world. In this poetic composition, Coleridge on the one hand with a penetrating psychological insight explores the unknown mysteries of the conscious and the unconscious and relates them to the living experiences of life, whereas on the other hand as a true priest of the Highest endowed with the innate divine power of imagination he reflects on the spiritual design of the universe wherein celestial powers keep a close watch over the good and evil deeds of the doers and requite them with appropriate reward and punishment. With his prophetic insight taking a probe into the unconscious with coherence and logic establishing causal relationship between events and lives, Coleridge brings to the fore those realities which often remain unknown in this world. Mariner's guilt-ridden psyche full of anguish in a state of loneliness abandoned by both God and fellow beings through realization and purgation paves way to divine grace wherein a hope lies for every sinner. He also shows the mysterious co-existence of the rational and the irrational, good and evil forces in the unconscious as well as in the external universe. Confession, repentance and remorse undoubtedly unburden and provide solace to a guilty soul to a great extent but the imprint of the guilt can not be completely obliterated; hence consciously or unconsciously it remains till the end of life as it is evident in case of the mariner. Coleridge has also presented an eco-centric world view by creating a bio-centric vision of the universe which consequently displacing socio-political energy with spiritual energy paves way to deep ecology conducive to the entire happiness of the mother earth.

Keywords: Bio-centric vision, deep ecology, guilt-ridden psyche, irrationality, purgation, romantic imagination, spiritual energy, unconscious.

The Ancient Mariner is the sublime poetic achievement of Romanticism in which Coleridge using imagination as the vehicle of truth brings to the fore those psycho-philosophic and metaphysical realities which often remain neglected, unknown and undiscovered in the world we live in. Romanticism, being a revolutionary intellectual and artistic movement, takes imagination as the sublime and the most powerful vehicle which leaps over the barriers of time and place; hence in its creative form it presents nature in its highest sense, identical to the soul of man, and thereby assuming spiritual character it works through

matter, shaping it organically. Coleridge in his treatment of imagination is close to Thomas Brown who takes imagination as an immense power that creates a sense of totality suggesting "the Omniscience of the Sovereign Intellect" (Brown, II: 413) because God's power is revealed to us as we scan His creation with this creative power of imagination. Coleridge making his concept of Imagination explicitly clear in *Biographia Literaria* writes:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as an identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still...it struggles to idealize and to unify. (Coleridge 1907:1, 202)

R. L. Brett observing the richness and depth of Coleridge's concept of imagination states that "Coleridge regards the imagination as the agent of reason" (Brett 1949: 88) and Norton explaining the nature of the reason in imagination states that "which...we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself.... The visible creation is terminus...of the invisible world. (Norton 2003:1 in his 114-15; 1118). Coleridge's genius with the cult of strangeness and creativity flows into the hidden and the mysterious, consequently the time worn theme of supernatural gets a new color and new prominence in the poem reflecting the maturity of Romantic Movement with the conquest of the unknown. In this poem, as C.M. Bowra asserts, Coleridge brings to the surface "all the hidden resources of his conscious and unconscious" (52) and relates his subject to life and to living experience touching equally guilt and remorse, suffering and relief, hate and forgiveness, grief and joy; hence all the events in the poem present a criticism of life. In miraculously imaginative way Coleridge has presented "powers who watch over the good and evil actions of men and requite them with appropriate rewards and punishments" (Bowra, 53), therefore in this poem narrating the tale of the mariner Coleridge, like Novalis who thinks that "the greatest good rests in the imagination" (Novalis III, 25, No 818), has proved the innate divine power of imagination in a true artist who is a true priest of the Highest and reveals the mystery of the heavenly and the eternal system of the universe.

"Christabel"; "Kubla Khan" and "The Ancient Mariner" are 'the most unusual and the most romantic pieces in English Romantic poetry', in which Coleridge "put all that he had" (Bowra 52). "The Ancient Mariner" is his greatest poem because "he put most of himself into it and in it spoke most fully from his inner being. The brilliant reality which he gives to this invention of his imagination comes from his prophetic insight into himself" (74). In order to surface this reality Coleridge also takes a probe into the unconscious through dreams which, if judged by rational standards, apparently have no direct relation to our waking life and seem quite absurd but simultaneously they have the power of stirring

elementary emotions in the most effective and indelible way, therefore, Coleridge much impressed by the impact of their strange power on psyche articulates in "Christabel" that "...such perplexity / As dreams too lively leave behind" and "The Ancient Mariner" bears the imprint of such a liveliness. In his dream world Coleridge provides its own coherence, logic and rules as Bowra commenting on the poem points out:

Things move indeed in a mysterious way; but not without some connecting relations which may reasonably be called causal. When in a fit of irritation or anger the Mariner shoots the albatross, he commits a hideous crime and is punished by the doom of "life-in-death," which means that, after being haunted by the presence of his dead comrades, he carries a gnawing memory to the end of his days. His shipmates, too, are the victims of the same laws when they are doomed to death as accomplices in his crime for saying that he was right to kill the bird. In such a system it is no less appropriate that when the Mariner feels love gushing from his heart at the sight of the water snakes, he begins to break the first horror of his spell, and the albatross falls from his neck. Once we accept the assumption that it is wrong to kill an albatross, the rest of the action follows with an inexorable fatality.... Coleridge makes his events so coherent and so close to much that we know in ourselves that we accept them as valid in their own world, which is not ultimately very dissimilar from ours. Because it has this inner coherence, "The Ancient Mariner" is not a phantasmagoria of unconnected events but a coherent whole which, by exploiting our acquaintance with our dreams, has its own causal relations between events and lives in its own right as something intelligible and satisfying(57-58).

Substantiating the point Bowra further states that:

Each action, and each situation, is presented in a concrete form in which the details are selected for their appeal to common experience. Coleridge exercises an imaginative realism. However unnatural his events may be, they are formed from natural elements, and for this reason we believe in them....In other words, though Coleridge begins by appealing to our experience of dreams, he so uses it as to present something which is more solid and more reasonable and more human than the most haunting dreams(59).

Mariner's comrades are hardly characters but they are more types than differentiated human beings and on account of this reason their agonies are simply and universally human. Under the existing circumstances what happens to them might happen to anyone, therefore we sympathize with them by sharing their pathos and agonies as Coleridge presents it in a masterly manner:

And every tongue, through utter drought, / Was withered at the root; /
We could not speak, no more than if / We had been choked with soot.(135-138)

In a most paradoxical and striking way it is the rain water coming from the heavenly sphere that provides solace and wonderful relief to the mariner as Coleridge puts it:

My lips were wet, my throat was cold. / My garments all were dank; /
Sure I had drunken in my dreams, / And still my body drank.(302-305)

Physical sensations and mental states remain interconnected in dreams as Aristotle opines that dreams have physiological origin but Coleridge crosses the boundaries by passing through Freudian unconscious plunges into C. G. Jung and Jacques Lacan's spiritual dream world wherein dreams bear witness to a superior kind of knowledge as they are inspiration from the realm of the divine. Coleridge correlates these dreams to waking state and capturing the elementary human emotions from the unconscious surfaces the reality in all its forms as he presents the Mariner in a fearful plight on the ship surrounded by the dead bodies of his comrades after committing the hideous crime. He has been presented as a tormented psyche in a state of utter helplessness and loneliness:

Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide, wide sea! / And never a saint took pity on / My soul in agony. (233-236)

Coleridge has presented the picture of a guilt-ridden psyche full of anguish in a state of loneliness abandoned both by God and the fellow beings. But even for tainted souls purgation through realization and remorse paves way to divine grace wherein a hope lies for every sinner; and with some sparks of unextinguished goodness in the soul, the Mariner beholds the angels standing by the dead bodies which is the source of an infinite relief to him. Such a celestial presence in the universe inspiring and motivating towards goodness becomes ultimately a source of hope and joy for a sinner as Coleridge has depicted in case of the Mariner.

This seraph-band, each waved his hand, / No voice did they impart— / No voice, but oh! The silence sank / Like music on my heart. (499-502)

In the wicked part of the universe where despair prevails with sin, the silent divinity with good promoting nature does not lag behind, similarly in our unconscious along with the dark spots of evil, goodness coupled with innate divinity does dwell. Thus subjectively and objectively Coleridge has highlighted these opposite forces as they are working from within and without. The paradoxical nature of the Mariner's voyage from England to the South Pacific is also symbolic of the journey from the known to the unknown, from the conscious to the unconscious, from the familiar to the unfamiliar or strange where one has to be very careful because in the unknown, unconscious and unfamiliar regions irrational and wicked forces work in a mysterious way. The poem is not all 'pother about a bird' but it does contain serious psycho-philosophic and metaphysical issues within its fold including the question of right and wrong, of crime and punishment which impel and compel a creative reader to dive deep to experience the undercurrent hidden under the musical and magical surface of the poem. The story has been presented with the appeal of high poetry containing all the symbolic magnetism wherein temporal things move to eternal representing the world of absolute values as Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* himself explains that "An IDEA, in the highest sense of the word, can not be conveyed but by a symbol" (I: 100). It is a myth presenting things and events of common nature in such an unusual and lively form that they force us to meditate seriously upon them with afresh look. Therefore, Coleridge in this poem concentrating on the neglected and undiscovered truth objectively

reveals the secrets of the universe and simultaneously at the subjective level penetrates into the realities of the unconscious.

"The Ancient Mariner" is, on the one hand, an enjoyable story but on the other hand, it is a myth revealing the dark and tormenting crisis in the human soul. In this poem, like Blake and Shelley, Coleridge by making an extension of the use of symbols creates a consistent whole in which things and events are interconnected with causality from the commission of the crime to its last results. as Bowra emphatically asserts:

Coleridge puts into his myth the essential qualities which make crime and punishment what they are and shows what they mean to the conscience when it is shaped and clarified by the imagination. He goes to the heart of the matter in its universal character, and he is able to do this because his myth is so striking that we pay special attention to it. (Bowra 68-69)

In the first part of the poem, the unexpected killing of the bird without any motive shows the essential irrationality of the behavior arising out of a simple perversity of will from the unconscious. The reckless killing of the bird, which has been hailed in God's name because of being friendly and helpful, is a crime against nature as well as against the sanctified relations of guest and host. The sailors take the bird as divine messenger whose presence has made their journey easier. The second part of the poem shows that by killing the bird the Mariner breaks a sacred law of life which reflects the essential frivolity of many crimes against the human, non-human and the ordered system of the world as he himself realizes, "And I had done a hellish thing" (92). Hence symbolically the killing of albatross becomes a typical representative of all these crimes taking place in the society. The consequent sufferings as punishment after the commission of the crime shows the corrupt and helpless nature of this fallen world associated with a sense of guilt. The Mariner finds himself in a world which is dead and loathsome. In such a spiritually barren world, the ship stops moving and all the sailors are tormented by thirst. The hideous scenes of the moving slimy creatures on the sea surface and the dance of the death –fires at night reflecting the image of dying universe haunted by menacing phantoms has been portrayed. The third section of the poem deals with the realization of a sense of guilt as the Mariner becomes conscious of his crime and resultantly faces isolation in the world. The guilt-ridden psyche of the perpetrator of the crime/sin witnesses the approaching doom as the Mariner sees the phantom ship: The Night mare Life-in-Death was she, | Who thicks man's blood with cold. (194-195). The depiction of life-in-death in the guise of a woman and the death of the sailors, one after the other, are indicative of spiritual barrenness and futility of life sensed by a guilt-possessed soul. The death of the Mariner's companions during the night actually symbolizes the gloom in the soul in its state of isolation when all ties with human and non-human world are broken.

The fourth section of the poem elaborates the extreme state of isolation and loneliness of a tormented guilt-ridden soul totally detached from human intercourse and the solace-giving power of nature. Coleridge, metaphysically and psychologically, shows how the essential goodness and mercy objectively working in the external universe and subjectively

rooted in our unconscious—a mini-universe within tend to save us even at the eleventh hour when the crisis creates chaos for utter damnation. Resultantly a change for the better takes place in the Mariner's heart when he unconsciously starts blessing the water snakes, the meanest creatures which kindles his heart to re-establish ties with the world of affections and altruism which opens the doors to bright future. Coleridge wonderfully presents a co-mingling of inherent innate divinity and the external divine power provides a sublime status to his poem as he opines in “On Poesy” in *Biographia Literaria* that “in every work of art there is a reconciliation of the external with the internal” of things and thoughts ,such as 'to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature—this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts” (BL: II, 258) It is what Harold Bloom observes, “When the Romantic poet confronted a landscape, the distinction between self and not-self tended to dissolve”(Bloom 1970:223). No doubt, nature is in fallen form , therefore, it remains imperfect and beneath paradise, but in nature man's creativity meets with God. Man's imagination can regenerate nature and raise transitory forms to the symbolic level of ever existent images and ideas what Coleridge is doing in these lines. God, human heart and man's moral nature become the motive force of his philosophy.

In the fifth section with the application of psychoanalytical and phenomenological approach, a creative reader senses how Coleridge depicts the process of the revival of the soul internally in the interior or unconscious and externally through the movements of the ship as well as by the presence of the celestial spirits standing by the bodies of the dead men bringing them back to life. Coleridge externalizes this experience in a surprising way through the Mariner, “It had been strange even in a dream,/ To have seen those dead men rise / The helmsman steered, the ship moved on” (334-336).The heavenly music in the air that gives solace to the Mariner is symbolic of the divine grace and mercy prevailing everywhere in this universe. Realizing the healing power of this heavenly music, the Mariner re-establishes his relations with both the world and God; consequently with the flow of the music in his soul the process of recovery starts as his soul begins to experience solace and is still inclined to move towards penance for its purification as the Mariner imagines of the two voices—justice and mercy, “With his cruel bow he laid full low/ The harmless Albatross..../The man hath penance done,/ And penance more will do” (400-1, 410-11).

The sixth section shows impediments in the process of healing on account of the existence of evil and fiendish powers in the universe as well as in the unconscious as the Mariner amid the haunting presence of his dead comrades has the apprehension that he is being pursued by some horrifying power of vengeance. Coleridge in a masterly manner expresses how repentance and humility brought by a sense of remorse in fiendish form create obstacles in the process of regaining the essential nobility of the soul. But the Mariner in a visionary state beholding angelic forms standing by the dead sailors realizes the gracious nature of God who forgives the stone hearted sinners only if they show their willingness to turn to him.

The last section of the poem shows that most of the traces of sin /crime have been obliterated from the guilty soul and the Mariner has got place in the main fold of his living companions but still the imprint of the guilt is unwashable from his soul and will remain till his death; hence the punishment of “life-in-death” is still at work. Coleridge seems to suggest that if a person commits a hideous crime like the Mariner, he/she can never be the same person in that life as he/ she was before committing the sin. Sometimes the residual light imprint of that crime becomes so insistence and cancerous that the person can not get relief without retelling it to someone else as we see in case of the Mariner as he articulates: Since then, at an uncertain hour, | That agony returns: | And till my ghastly tale is told, | This heart within me burns. (585-588) Through confession, repentance and remorse the Mariner has almost unburdened himself as most of the criminals do as to the extent which is possible in this world but his sense of guilt can not be completely obliterated and it will remain consciously or unconsciously with him till his death. Therefore the tale of “The Ancient Mariner” is not confined to a myth of crime and punishment or guilt and redemption but it suggests more things with its complex design. The intermingling and interweaving of different issues present a complex vision of the universe we live in and the unconscious that is within us. Finally addressing the Wedding Guest, The Mariner also imparts a powerful message of eco-centric or bio-centric world which is the real religion and divine postulate of this universe. It is an imaginative imitation based on sympathetic identification of the Mariner who alters himself into what he sees. In the light of the divine power of the imagination Coleridge through Mariner conforms himself what he sees and wishes to be, thereby he takes his poem up to the highest level of sublimity as Novalis says, “Poetry is the greatest art of construction of transcendental health. The poet is thus the transcendental physician.”(Qtd. Furst 139). Love and faith make our life holy; hence it becomes an eternal poetry. Coleridge, like Collins and Shelley, lifts the veil from the face of the eternal and beautiful, and thereby creates the universe anew with bio-centric vision. Only by living in the sense of holy presence man can attain his true self and reaffirm belongingness to the divine. It is possible only by the divine power of imagination which can trace the development of the self what Coleridge and Schilling called the mind in its “process of self –construction” –a phrase that has been rough analogies in Keats's “vale of soul making” or Wordsworth's notion of the growth of the mind to achieve prophetic stage. Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* also asserts a last definition of metaphysics as “know thyself and so shalt thou know God,” as far as is permitted to a creature, and in God all things (BL. II:212)

Northrop Frye in *Romanticism Reconsidered* also gives inkling to this divine design as he asserts that 'Romantic vision fuses history, politics, philosophy and religion into one grand design, by asserting Providence-or some form of natural teleology.....from which will emerge a new man on a new earth which is a restored Paradise.(Frye 1963: 44-46). Therefore, the Romantic ecology which Coleridge presents in the poem moves to the spiritual principle even in relation to physical revolution as

Aidan Day thinks that Romanticism may be taken as something 'that makes a virtue out of the displacement of socio-political energy into internal or spiritual energy.' (Day 90) Harold Bloom stressing the role of imagination in romantic poetry also takes it to spiritual heights as he writes, "The Romantic Movement is from nature to the imagination's freedom.... and the imagination's freedom is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self." (Bloom 1970:6) Providing the universe a spiritual color Bloom further states that "The divine Architect has designed the universe analogically, relating the physical, moral, and spiritual realms by an elaborate system of correspondence." (Bloom 1970:209). Wordsworth is very close to Coleridge when he observes that "higher minds' are not slaves to the sensory world but are stimulated by that world to see beyond it as he articulates in *The Prelude*:

...In a world of life they live, | By sensible impressions not enthralled |
But quickened, roused, and made thereby more fit | To hold
communion with the invisible world | Such minds are truly from the
Deity, | For they are powers: and hence the highest bliss | That can be
known to theirs. | (1805, 100-8: Wordsworth, Abrams and
Gill 1979:464)

The eco-centric world vision of Coleridge also gets its sustenance from Jonathan Bate's opinions as he observes that "The key thing about Romantic writing is the way in which it invites the reader to engage imaginatively with the non-human." (Bate 2000:199) Bate's views are also on Coleridge line as bringing into light the philosophy of Rousseau he concentrates on the controlling myth of ecopoetics—a myth of pre-political, the prehistoric: it is a Rousseauesque story about imagining a state of nature prior to the fall into property, into inequality and into the city." (Bate 2000:266). Of course, Coleridge has presented a vision of deep ecology to bring about a change in the social outlook by emphasizing on the point as Pramod K. Nayar asserts that "Both human and non-human life forms have intrinsic values" but "anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it." (Nayar 246). The romantic ecological appeal is also reflected through the 'glittering eye' of the mariner that stands for the apex wisdom of a saintly figure residing in the world of nature which brings a desired change in the Wedding—Guest. Hence, when seen with a penetrating eye, the poem also exhibits a move from known to unknown, conscious to unconscious and innocence to experience. Above all, with its theo-philosophic outlook the poem reawakes us with the great message of universal brotherhood among human and non-human world. The mariner also witnesses the divine design of the universe as he sees 'a heavenly sight' of rare kind "The pilot and pilot's boy", "Dear Lord in Heaven" and the Hermit (507, 509) representing religious institution with true preacher and the existence of the Divine power with mercy respectively. He has also highlighted the paradoxical nature of the life and the world having bright and dark sides with ravishing moments and pressing responsibilities. In his vision he has taken life not merely analytical but more than this in creative form wherein lies its meaning, purpose and richness. He also takes a deep philosophic and

psychological probing into the unknown mysteries and reveals them with a sense of strangeness and bewilderment deducing alike from the paradoxical beauty of visible world and the depth of the human soul or unconscious. He has juxtaposed this corrupt and sinful world in which a hideous sin is committed with the brilliance of the unearthly divine system in which angelic beings keep a watch over mankind. His creative genius with penetrating insight sees the strange forces working behind the visible world as he reveals the roles of these mysterious and unknown forces at work in life through dreams and fantasy; therefore Hazlitt has rightly stated that his genius “had angelic wings and fed on manna”(Hazlitt V 167). Keeping in view the pragmatic approach embedded in the idealistic vision of the high philosophy Bowra's concluding assertion is absolutely appropriate about this poem as he states that “ 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”(Bowra 75).

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