

## EXTRAPOLATION OF COLERIDGE'S THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER IN THE COVID-19 SCENARIO

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### **Abstract:**

*Published in 1798, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is the precious gem of English poetry. The verse demonstrates inexorable sea expanses, human suffering, crime and punishment, and of course, the human relation with the natural world. With the dramatic disruption due to coronavirus, the poem is having a new meaning and purpose. In this current unsteady and nightmarish situation, the poem has been rightly acclaimed as a 'modern fable'. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner recounts the experiences of a sailor who commits the heinous crime of killing innocent Albatross and undergoes unutterable agony on his sea voyage. The universality of the poem cannot be overlooked in the present scenario as not any symbolic traveler but the people from the whole world feel a bit lost in the sea odyssey and ordeals full of covid-19 variants and diverse symptoms. The Ancient Mariner commits a crime against the divine law of Nature; consequently, there is an upheaval in the world of nature. Similarly, human beings have also challenged Nature and are compelled to suffer for their crime. The COVID-19 pandemic as per the available sources originated in the seafood wholesale market in central Wuhan China and quickly spread to various countries. Although, the exact origin of the COVID-19 is still unknown, specialist blames undue human activity that enabled this zoonotic disease to jump to people.*

**Keywords:** *Ancient Mariner, Post Covid-19, Coleridge, Crime and Punishment, Nature, Epidemic, Albatross, zoonotic, allegorical, Claustrophobia.*

### **Introduction**

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is a celebrated literary ballad based on the universal Christian theme of 'crime and punishment'. Inspired by the encouragement and intellectual stimulation Coleridge received from Wordsworth; he entered into the most creative period of the Romantic Age and produced a series of extraordinary poems. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is among one of the four poems that appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Coleridge got the idea for the poem from a friend who had dreamt about a skeleton ship, Wordsworth writes in *Fenwick Note* "...the poem of the Ancient Mariner founded on a dream, as Mr. Coleridge said..." The poet has skillfully blended symbols, images, supernatural elements, horror, medievalism, sensuousness, romantic imagination, mystery, and the beauty of nature that makes it the representative poem of his age. Coleridge through his accomplished art has naturalized the supernatural in the poem.*

The poem tells the story of a long beard and glittering-eyed Ancient Mariner who stops a wedding guest and begins to recount his experience of a long sea voyage his slaughter of an albatross, the death of his crewmates, his suffering, and eventual redemption. Coleridge proves himself a skillful storyteller and a profound psychologist; he combines the material world with the theme of the supernatural and achieves a higher purpose. In recent years, the environment has become a hot topic of discussion. Thousands of years

ago nature may have had more control over humans. But now the relationship has become one-sided and it can be figured out that the human is overexploiting nature. The poem attempts to explore moral questions about human nature and its relationship with nature. During the pandemic when lockdown came into force everyone was suffering from isolation just like the mariner. The COVID-19 pandemic is transforming human relations with nature at multiple levels and there is a need to understand the cause and impact of the global pandemic. We have witnessed bizarre calamities and unnatural phenomena where we are not accustomed to. It seems that God has sent this pestilence to punish us for our sinful acts. In India, we witnessed frustrating scenes through the newspapers, media, and sometimes by naked eyes. Amidst COVID-19 havoc when we analyze allegorical aspect of poem, there are a lot of situational similarities. Being disconnected and alienated from a normal life, humans beings are also compelled to go through quite breathtaking and unpleasant experiences in completely unknown and unusual surroundings.

### **Aims and Objective**

The main aim of this article is to analyze the situational similarity between the circumstances of the ancient mariner and the present surrounding we are belonging to in the pandemic scenario. This article makes an effort to explore human nature and its relationship with nature. The paper also focuses on the human predicament and human psychology while going through hard times ceaselessly. The illustration of the theme of 'crime and punishment' is also the objective of this article. In the conclusive part, the article takes an optimistic retreat.

### **Literature Review**

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is an immortal poem. Amidst this pandemic, this poem has bagged the special attention of critics, authors, and literature lovers and they allude to it as “harrowing and prescient”, and suits the captive audience of the 2020-21 pandemic. This pandemic has created an unprecedented disruption to daily life for large swaths of individuals. Ed Yong, 2020 writes, “In his classical hero journey the archetypal plot structure of myths and movies the protagonist reluctantly departs from normal life, enters the unknown, endures successive trials, and eventually returns home, having been transformed”. If such a character exists in the coronavirus story, it is not an individual but the entire modern world.

Various critics recognize *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as an allegorical poem. Charlotte A D Fiehn in her article *Allegory and the Supernaturalism in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* writes that the poem has achieved allegorical value and the albatross delineates nature and the slaughtering of the bird refers to the violation of divine law of Nature. She puts the idea in the words: “The Albatross is also symbolic of the spirit of nature that subsequently punishes the mariner and his crewmates”. Nayef Ali Al-Joulani and Amer Hassan Al-Rashid, 2012 argue that “the Mariner's sinful violation of nature and the consequent physical and mental ordeals he is left to suffer” results from provoking a “retaliating nature” by killing the albatross. The mariner interruption of the wedding guest to recount his experience shows that he has learned about nature's essential relationship to man and his story is “essential for the forgiveness since it may stop further violation”. Aside from the albatross, Coleridge presents other substantial elements of nature as water, wind, sun, and moon and depicts the changes in them through color symbolism. There is some scope for considering the allegorical perspective of the poem in the COVID scenario.

### **Textual Study**

Nature is the most powerful and mysterious force of the universe that influences man greatly. Human beings and nature have shared an intimate relationship since time immemorial. This relationship has been reflected through the writers and poets throughout the different culture across the world. A variety of novels, poems, stories, and other genre of literature have been depicted on the backdrop of issues concerning nature. Human beings have always shown their fascination for the world around them. The inquiring and imaginative mind of human beings has responded to nature in multifold ways. But,

unfortunately, in recent years human beings have exploited natural resources and nature to their extreme. People have become more inclined to materialism that in turn has led to the rat race and unhealthy competition among fellow beings. More and more deadly weapons have been developed which can deliver death and destruction at hundred fold scales. Man takes this as his success but in reality, it has brought extreme trials and tribulations, difficulties and disasters for men and this is the worst cause of human degradation and deprivation. The selfish men will one day destroy their most beautiful and plentiful Earth and thus, the foolish man alone will be responsible for destroying himself and his wonderful Heaven. Therefore, scholars and thinkers have expressed their deep concern for the environmental issue.

In the history of English Literature, the eighteenth century was the age of stabilization, tolerance, and growth of wealth and prosperity. The approaching industrial revolution had made man fanatic for material love. At the end of the century, artists and intellectuals sought a break from the 18th-century conventions. In 1798, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge together inaugurated the Romantic Age with the Publication of their Lyrical Ballads, thus opened a new chapter for Nature-Literature in History of English Literature. The slogan of this age was “The Return to Nature” and they conceived humanity in the lap of nature. Whenever a man gets disillusioned by the world around him, he tries to satisfy his inquisitiveness through literature. Heavily shaken by the corona pandemic many of us are currently thinking about how we could overcome this unprecedented situation. The poem helps us to step into the supernatural world of Mr. Coleridge and enlighten our soul as well as paves a way to understand the real complexity of the human conflict.

In the Corona pandemic thinkers and scholars have addressed *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as “the epic poem you need for quarantine” and the 1798 poem appears to be one that was made for 2020-21. Angela Cockayne, an artist on the faculty of Bath Spa University collaborated with the Arts Institute of the University of Plymouth and assembled a company of actors, singers, writers, scientists, naturalists and one polar guide for online reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner. They read the poem at the rate of about sixteen lines a day. This Ancient Mariner being read was inaugurated on 18th April 2020 with church bells and a surging crowd, stilled by the seductive voice of Jeremy Irons, a celebrated English actor, and activist. Other actors Tilda Swinton, Alan Cumming, and Willem Dafoe, singers Marianne Faithfull and Iggy Pop, novelist Hilary Mantel, poet Simon Armitage and other talented artists contributed to this being read with their voice. The special effects of bells, birds call, bubbles, howling winds, roaring waves, cracking ice, whale songs, etc. added another charm to the success of the reading.

*The Rime of Ancient Mariner* is a parable of the old sailor's crime against Nature (killing of Albatross), punishment, repentance, and reconciliation (forgiveness from God). Set in the backdrop of middle age the poem is a tale of retribution and the christen theme of 'crime and punishment' dominates it. The seven-part ballad begins as a tale told by an ancient mariner. Like Wandering Jew, a character from Christen legend who taunted Jesus on the way to crucifixion was cursed to wander on the earth until Judgment Day, Ancient Mariner, the protagonist of this poem also commits the terrible crime of killing Albatross and is condemned by the way of penance to travel from land to land and teach by his example love and reverence to all. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner begins suddenly and abruptly and fixes our attention from the very first line where the mariner stops a man who is on his way to a wedding ceremony and begins to recount his experience of a long sea voyage. The wedding guest is drawn up towards the “long grey beard and glittering eyes” of the Ancient Mariner and reluctantly listens to the mariner's story. The mariner's account begins with the ship leaving the harbor with two hundred crewmen and sailing southward. A tremendous storm blows and the ship even furthers to the South Pole where the crew is awed as they encounter the “mist and snow”. An Albatross, a big sea bird comes to their ship and breaks the pristine lifelessness of the Antarctic. All the mariner of that ship welcomes it as a “Christian Soul” and

feeds it and also plays with it. A good harmony develops between the Ancient mariner and the albatross; as it “came to the mariner's hollo!” They take the bird as a good omen, as after its arrival the wind starts to blow. The most crucial point of the mariner's tale is confessing his crime; he kills the innocent bird in an act of wantonness.

God save thee, ancient Mariner!  
 `From the fiends, that plague thee thus!  
 Why look'st thou so? with my crossbow  
 I shot the ALBATROSS.

On this poignant act of the mariner, first, the other crewmen in the ship blame him but soon they change their mind when fair breeze continues, they come to believe the bird was the source of the “fog and mist” and supports the killing of bird thus they also accomplice themselves in the sin. Their punishment begins, the wind drops, and the ship becomes trapped in the vast silent sea. We come to know the outlook of Mariner towards nature when he says “Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea.” All the crewmen undergo unutterable sufferings. Amid the rotting ocean, the sailors grow so thirsty, their “throats unslaked with black lips baked” but there isn't even a drop of clean water they can quench their thirst:

Water, water everywhere  
 And all the board did shrink;  
 Water, water everywhere,  
 Nor any drop to drink.

Coleridge seems a visionary with the prophetic powers as when we analyze the poem in the 21st century, we encounter a lot of similar scenarios between the physical and mental condition of crewmen and the people belonging to the post-COVID-19 world. Like Mariner, the entire world has set on an archetypal journey that runs right into the dilemma, suffering, and desolation. When the Mariner begins his saga of trial and tribulation, the wedding guest tries to resist being stopped by the grey-beard man but is left with no choice and sits down as a promising pupil to listen. The wedding reception refers to the social gathering or social life and amidst the pandemic the modern man's compulsion to alienate from the social gathering or social life. The 'wedding' as though refers to a luxurious setting where nature is subdued. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge throws light on the natural world and the powers it asserts over humans. The killing of albatross can be perceived as man's pointless attempt to master nature. Like the other crewmen who also accomplice themselves in the crime, people belonging to this era are unknowingly appreciating and following the inhumane and barbarous action that causes human degradation, deprivation, and destruction. The paradoxical statement 'water, water everywhere' rang again with an outcry “give me oxygen, oxygen! Oxygen! Ah oh...” when the coronavirus has spread completely in the air and many corona patients met their ultimate doom due to the shortage of oxygen cylinders. One of the most striking lifestyle changes resulting from the COVID-19 is the mandatory use of a mask to reduce the risk of catching and transmitting the disease. The dead Albatross hanging around the neck of Mariner reminds him of the spiritual burden of his crime whereas the mask keeps us fresh with the ghoulish horrors of COVID-19.

The natural world communicates through the supernatural powers to punish the Ancient Mariner. The Mariner along with his shipmates undergoes physical and psychological havoc in the limbo-like situation. They are cut off from normal life; they are denied the basic ability to communicate and compelled to be in isolation even in each other's company. Suddenly, mariner catches the sight of a mysteriously approaching skeleton ship; an iota of hope touches him. Mariner's throat is dry, he sucks his blood, so he can utter for help. The logically impossible fact that this is moving while the mariner's ship is stuck creates scary contrast. The ship is carrying two women figures “Death and his mate, Death-in life” who are gambling with dice to determine the fate of sailors including the Mariner just like the soldiers who dived for Jesus' clothes after his death on the cross. The two hundred crewmen are bestowed with death,

their souls pass “like whizz of my (mariner's) crossbow” and the only one man alive on the ship is Mariner's his soul has been won by Life-in-Death. Mariner undergoes suffering worse than Death. Detached from his normal life he suffers from Claustrophobia. After the suffering of seven days and seven nights spiritual transformation occurs within him, he gets fascinated by the “rich attire” of water snakes and blesses them “unaware”.

'A spring of love gushed from my heart'.

At this moment, the Ancient Mariner realizes that he can pray, the dead albatross falls off from his neck into the sea and his guilt is partially expiated. He is brought back to land by the angelic spirit.

So, the present scenario has got similarities with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as the contemporary ecological catastrophe has effectively put the men into isolation, and the man is subjected to indefinite despair and frustration and lockdown upon lockdown has made the people of the world Claustrophobic like the mariner. After going through the deeply unpleasant view of death and suffering a modern reader can appreciate the poem with the threat of COVID-19 and other natural disasters. The lines from the poem “Alone, alone all alone,/Alone on a wide wide sea!” juxtapose with the challenges of isolation during the pandemic. The death of two hundred men in atonement for the death of one bird leaves the reader awestricken. This pandemic has also disrupted normal life; we have encountered pathetic scenes across the world. The death toll in India has reached more than 4 lakh which is alarming. Moreover, in our case, the million health care professionals- doctors, physicians, nurses etc. and scientists who have risked their life and struggling long working hours, fatigue, and extreme psychological stress to conquer this pandemic can be admired the angelic spirit (just like the hermit who grants the mariner absolution from sin).

After the first hit of COVID-19, India gambled on lockdown to save millions life. The declaration of 21 days lockdown on the midnight of 24th March turns millions of migrant workers into wanderers overnight. Like Mariner who was set on an endless journey in the ocean, the workers walked under the sun as well as under the moon desperately trying to return to their home. They battled with hunger, fatigue, mental-physical torments on their journey to home. These workers have parallels to Mariner as they also undergo death-like situations, a travelling man even says, “We will die walking before Coronavirus hits us”.

At the end of the poem, the illustration of an embracing theory of love between creatures makes it truly a moral parable. The wedding guest loses all his interest in the feast and feels himself wiser with the deep moral lesson. The essence of the poem is reduced to the simplest and has been conveyed emphatically in the following lines:

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.

After getting the true essence of the Mariner's phantasmal tale, like the wedding guest, the readers also feel spiritual ecstasy. Charles Lamb deeply admired the poem for “Human feeling” whereas Rossetti says, “I conceived that the leading point about Coleridge's work is its human love”.

Overall, the Mariner's text and context of crime, suffering, punishment, redemption and reconciliation will always be relevant in this materialistic world of cut throat competition until we comprehend the philosophy of 'Live and Let Live' and 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'

### **Conclusion**

*The Rime of Ancient Mariner* is a poem of par excellence endowed with romantic beauty based on the theme of crime, punishment, and redemption. The analysis of the poem says, all the creatures and mankind are bound with one another in such inseparable ties of relationship that their loss and gain cannot

be separated in terms of the individual. The current situation has got a lot of similarities with the poem. Therefore, The Rime of Ancient Mariner is still relevant in the current situation when every individual is struggling for survival. Coleridge has perceived human life as the perpetual struggle between Nature and humans. Socially and physically disconnected and alienated from normal life, the man is still in dilemma to accept the 'new normal'. In a nutshell, the moral preaching in the poem opens vistas of peace, love and wisdom for the human beings amidst the adversities of the pandemic.

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