



JACLR

*Journal of Artistic
Creation & Literary
Research*

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 7 Issue 1 (June 2019) Article 8

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Recommended Citation

Cantos Delgado, Clara, Pilar García García and Julio San Román Cazorla. "The Mariner or the Wedding-Guest? Discerning the Wise Man and the Fool in Coleridge's 'The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner'" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 7.1 (2019): 87-92.

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

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Abstract: The present work analyses *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge from a Christian, Platonic and Neo-platonic perspective with the intention of elucidating who of the poem's main two characters, the Mariner and the Wedding-guest, represents wisdom and who foolishness. With that intent, the previously alluded doctrines and different texts will be brought into the discussion.

Keywords: *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge, Platonism, Christianity, Neo-Platonism, Romanticism.

Clara CANTOS DELGADO, Pilar GARCÍA GARCÍA and Julio SAN ROMÁN CAZORLA
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0. Introduction

When talking about Romanticism, it is unavoidable to think in what is considered to be the first Romantic work of English literature, *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although previous works had already established some features of the movement, it was this collection of poems what constituted the first eminently pure English Romantic work due to the fact that it established the main tenets for the development of the movement. The collection, published in 1798, includes one of the most famous poems in British literature, "The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner". The poem consists of a conversation

between a Wedding-Guest and a Mariner who narrates a story of wrecked ships, boats and dreadful places. This account of the facts, designed as a framed story, apparently reveals an untold truth to the Wedding-Guest that the reader should be able to discover through the reading of the poem. However, the apparent disconnectedness of the events results confusing for the majority of the readers, who eventually wonder if the Mariner is a fool. Notwithstanding the sense of lack of causality in the events, there still remains the question of whether the Mariner is a wise man, holder of an ineffable truth or an old man who has eventually come mad.

At the beginning of the poem, the Wedding-Guest is physically stopped by the Mariner, who is described as a “[...] grey-beard Loon!” (Coleridge 2).

But still he holds the wedding-guest—
 There was a Ship, quoth he—
 'Nay, if thou'st got a laughsome tale,
 'Marinere! come with me.' (Coleridge 2)

However, both his “glittering eye” (Coleridge 2) and his narration fascinate the Wedding-Guest so that he accepts hearing the Mariner’s tale; by the end of which he becomes, as stated in the last lines of the poem, “A sadder but a wiser man” (Coleridge 27). Additionally, if this affirmation and “The Rime” as a whole are seen under the light of one of William Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell”, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees” (13), a question can be posed: who of the two interlocutors is to be the wise man and who the fool of Coleridge’s “The Rime”? Therefore, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the Mariner is not as foolish or deranged as he seems, and that the sound choice is to listen and consider his words. In order to reach this conclusion, different ways of acknowledging Truth will be examined. Having considered many possible interpretations to Coleridge’s work, including the possibility of the poem’s absence of meaning as a criticism to Hume’s theory of causality, the reading chosen to answer the question proposed will resort to a combination of the Platonic and the Christian doctrines, eventually merging them into a Neoplatonic one. In addition, the difficulties inherent to the transmission of Truth and those specifically experienced by the Mariner will be addressed, as this issue is depicted in the poem in its content as well as in its form, since the narrator of “The Rime” is not the Mariner but a third person narrator.

1. The Path to Sadness and Wisdom

The Christian interpretation leads the reader into considering two figures from the Scriptures: Christ and Judas. In the *Gospels*, Judas, one of Christ’s apostles, betrays him in exchange for thirty silver coins (*King James Bible*, Matt. 26. 15). The betrayal eventually leads to the crucifixion of Christ and, consequently, to his sacrifice in order to purge all the sins of humanity, establishing a new Covenant between God and humankind that offered the possibility of salvation. In order to achieve this redemptive act, Christ’s death was required, opening two possibilities: either he was killed or he resorted to suicide, the latter not being a real option since suicide is a sin that would have taken him straight to Hell without the

possibility of redemption. Jorge Luis Borges suggests in his text "Las tres versiones de Judas" that the only chance that there was for Christ to save humanity was to be betrayed, which makes Judas as much a part of God's plan as Christ himself (181). Thus, both figures can be considered to be sinners and saviours in the end (Borges 178-179).

This duality is represented in "The Rime" by the same character, the Mariner, since he betrays and condemns himself and also is his own redeemer. In addition, the weapon which is used to shoot down the Albatross becomes quite meaningful.

God save thee, ancient Marinere!
'From the fiends that plague thee thus—
'Why look'st thou so?'—with my cross-bow
I shot the Albatross. (Coleridge 4)

The cross-bow, in other words, a weapon in the shape of a cross that may stand either as a symbol of Christ's Crucifixion, as is the case in the first of the two possibilities stated below or as a symbol of the will of God, in the second case. The killing of the Albatross may be regarded as an apparently senseless act that apparently allows them to refrain their journey. However, the killing can also have various symbolic explanations: it can stand as a symbol for Christ's accumulation of all of humanity's sins, a reading literally depicted in the poem by the subsequent hanging of the Albatross from the Mariner's neck (Coleridge 7), or for Judas' betrayal, being the bird the representation of Christ. In this way, both Christ and Judas are impersonated by the Mariner and from this point on, he will undertake, like Christ did after his death, a journey through Hell; a personal state of torment caused by his guilt for being the only survivor of the crew, inasmuch as by thirst, cold and solitude. Moreover, the killing of the Albatross fosters his rejection by his fellow crewmen, "Ah wel-a-day! what evil looks / Had I from old and young;" (Coleridge 7). Hereby, the Mariner is accused, for the first time in "The Rime" of foolishness. It is then worth mentioning that when Christ was put in the same situation, he preached: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23. 34).

When the wind stops blowing and all hope is lost, Death and Life-in-Death make their appearance and cast the dice; consequently, "four times fifty living men", who might be conceived as the false prophets that preached before Christ (Coleridge 9), are taken by Death, while the Mariner is saved by Life-in-Death who chooses him in the last game in which she is victorious.

The naked Hulk alongside came
And the Twain were playing dice;
(The Game is done! I 've won, I 've won!)
Quoth she, and whistled thrice. (Coleridge 9)

Furthermore, the fact that she whistles "thrice" can be interpreted as both, a symbol of the three days Christ spent in Hell, or the three times the rooster crowed before Resurrection.

Once the Mariner is released by Life-in-Death, he sails in a phantom ship with the skeletons as its crew (Coleridge 10-11) until the lighthouse, Enlightenment, is made visible in the distance and the seraph-band signals for it (Coleridge 20). According to the Christian interpretation, the Mariner would be ascending to Heaven; however, since he has still not been cleansed, he cannot listen the song of the "seraph-band":

This seraph-band, each wav'd his hand,
 No voice did they impart—
 No voice; but O! the silence sank,
 Like music on my heart. (Coleridge 22)

Then, when the ship sinks, he is rescued by the "Pilot" (Father) and the "Pilot's boy" (Son) and is brought ashore (Heaven) to the Hermit (Holy Spirit), who enlightens him and leads him to purification and Redemption. Thus, the Mariner's and, symbolically, Christ's deed is completed.

I saw a third—I heard his voice:
 It is the Hermit good!
 He singeth loud his godly hymns
 That he makes in the wood.
 He'll shrive my soul, he'll wash away
 The Albatross's blood. (Coleridge 23)

Reading the poem from a Platonic perspective, the Mariner's journey can be understood as a recreation of the Myth of the Cavern. The Mariner's journey stands as a search for the Truth. Just as the chained men inside the cavern, the Mariner sets sail immersed in a reality that he thinks he knows and understands, being the killing of the Albatross a symbol of this conviction. Additionally, the fall of the dead Albatross from the Mariner's neck symbolises the breaking of the chains, which were preventing him from reaching the Truth, hence, it acts as the starting point of his inner journey towards the Truth. Nevertheless, he suffers for it the critiques of his comrades; in other words, the foolish man that has taken a step towards the Truth is denounced by the truly blinded eyes. Coming to the end of the journey, when he is saved by the Pilot and his boy, he arrives at a state of transition and starts to acknowledge the Truth. This process culminates when he finally gets to the Hermit's land and is questioned about his journey.

Having analysed both Christian and Platonic approaches and considering that "The Rime" belongs to the Romantic Movement, the Neoplatonic interpretation seems to be the meeting point between Platonic metaphysics and Christian symbolism. According to Neoplatonic philosophers, the metaphysical scheme begins with a transcendent deity called Father, which is then used as the representation of God by Christian philosophers, inheritors of Platonism. Father encloses Power, a productive principle from where the Intellect proceeds and which the Mariner attempts to reach throughout "The Rime". In its duality, Intellect contemplates the Forms of the World-Soul and creates and governs the Material-World, a

copy of the first one. In this second world reside Nature, governor of the terrestrial domain, and Destiny, which enslaves the human soul and appears throughout the poem in the general absence of choices and free will, e.g. the killing of the Albatross, Death and Life-in-Death "casting dice", etc. In order to become pure Intellect, humans have to free their soul from its cage, the body, and consequently from Nature and Destiny. An ascetic life of contemplation and proper behaviour is recommended to separate the soul from the substance and its limitations, and to protect it from demonic powers. Thus, the Mariner begins a process of contemplation and learning while surviving Death and Life-in-Death and sailing the seas until his arrival to the land where the Hermit resides. At the beginning of his journey, the Mariner is imprisoned by the Albatross, as in the Platonic interpretation, but instead of chains, the Albatross stands as the soul's cage, the body. When the Albatross falls from his neck, the Mariner is released from the Matter and is brought to the land of the Hermit; him being a model of ascetic life, representing the conversion of the Mariner into pure Intellect. Consequently, in both readings, the Platonic and the Neoplatonic, the spread of the Truth becomes a moral obligation as according to the Greek deontologist ideas, which pushes the Mariner into sharing his story over and over again, as he does with the Wedding-Guest.

Having understood the processes through which the Mariner acknowledges the Truth, the ineffability of Truth is evinced in both perspectives. First, according to the Christian interpretation, if the Mariner had been to Heaven and Hell, he is forbidden to tell what he saw there conforming to the Holy Spirit's words (II Corinth. 12. 2-4); even though he is also compelled to guide others to salvation. Second, according to the Platonic and, overall, to the Neoplatonic interpretation, the Mariner is seeking Intellect, a kind of deity that is an expression of transcendence. This entity, bigger than humankind that can never reach it as it belongs to the perfect world (the World of the Ideas/the Soul-World) of which we only perceive a copy (the Material World). Or, in as some of Coleridge's contemporaries named this entity: Poetic Genius, Intellectual Beauty and Intellectual Breeze, among other nomenclatures. This element is, therefore, unreachable for mortals and so it justifies why the Mariner may be considered as a fool by those who do not comprehend this Truth.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been made clear, independently of the interpretation which is taken, that the Mariner has managed to perceive the Truth and that he has the moral obligation to tell his tale once he is back to the Material World. Nonetheless, as it has already been hinted in the paper, he cannot speak about it freely, either because it would be hard to believe, unintelligible, unutterable, or forbidden. This dilemma will be recurrent in literature, as in the case of Cassandra in Homer's *The Iliad*, Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, or Ireneo Funes in Borges' "Funes el Memorioso". To finish with and to settle the answer to the question to which this paper is devoted: at the beginning, the Mariner, though "ancient" (gone doddering) and "loony-looking" is wiser than the Wedding-Guest as he knows the Truth. In the end, both the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest are wise (knowers of the Truth) but also, sadder men since they are both entailed to wisdom and its curse.

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