



## Evolution of Man's Ecological Sense: An Ecocritical Reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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### Abstract

Coleridge is one of the lake poets of Britain. For a long time, the lake poets were regarded as a negative group and were not given correct attention. In fact, they have paid much attention to nature in their works, and presented the readers with a profound moral theme, which is a symbol that they were concerned about the future destiny of the human being. Currently the ecocriticist reading of their works is a new way to search for the implied meaning of the poetry. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a good representation of the relationship between mankind and nature. Based on this idea, this article will attempt to analyze the relationship between man and nature in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

**Key words:** Coleridge; *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; Human and nature; Ecological awareness

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### INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that modern environmentalism begins with "A Fable for Tomorrow" in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Garrard, 2004). The birth of this fable has aroused great discussion, and set off a massive ecological concern on the destruction of the environment. Ecocriticism, as a term, was proposed by the American scholar William Rueckert in 1978, which aims at applying the concept of the ecology and some other related

concepts to the study of literature in order to arouse people's attention to their surroundings. But due to the absence of its core research organizations, ecocriticism had been in a fringe till the 1980s. It was until the mid-1990s that ecocriticism as a genre had been established.

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty, 1996).

This concept was put forward by Glotfelty to show us that the main task of this subject is to examine the relationship between human beings and nature through the study of the literature and culture, which can help the human being to realize that the ecological crisis in nature is the crisis of human civilization, human nature and imagination, thus call for the protection of nature and harmonious coexistence between the human being and nature.

As we all know, all the British Romantic poets seem to harbor a kind of affection to nature. They are nature lovers and admirers. Their age is an era in which the Industrial Revolution began. Due to the rapid development of social productive forces, the widespread use of machines and the surge of the different products, a serious of global environmental pollution and ecological damage occurred. The relationship between the human being and nature became more and more tense, which also caused a threat to the survival of the human being. So some poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, began to express their hope of the harmonious coexistence of the human being and nature, which also contains a kind of philosophical thinking. In their eyes, nature can purify people's souls, so people should get close to nature, and the harmony between man and nature is the most moral thing in the world. But in the real world, as the force of the human beings to conquer nature continue to strengthen, nature

is not as mysterious and awful as before, but becomes the target of arbitrary plunder by the human being. As a result, the link between people and nature is broken, and the complete alienation from nature causes survival crisis for the human being. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as a great 19th-century British Romantic poet, though not very productive, has a very high literary reputation. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) is one of his masterpieces in the British literary history, which can be regarded as a representative classic to explore the relationship between human being and nature. The poem can be divided into three stages according to the change of the relationship between man and nature:

## 1. IN AWE OF NATURE

The whole poem is a story told by an ancient mariner to a young wedding guest. According to the ancient mariner, when navigation began, "The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared, /Merrily did we drop/Below the kirk, below the hill, /Below the lighthouse top." A picture of the harmonious coexistence between man and nature appeared before the reader. However, as they traveled to the south, the climate became worse and worse, which was not suitable for the crew's survival. In the stage when the human being were ignorant, they could not understand that the climate showed different characteristics in different places of the Earth, so when the sun stayed all day in the glorious sky, the sea storm continued blowing, fog and snow appeared, the mariners were full of fear, they could not understand that there were many unpredictable changes in the natural forces, but they were willing to take the risk of continuing navigation. Despite such an adverse environment, nature was still friendly to these mariners. An albatross, which was regarded as a symbol of good omen, was sent out to guide these mariners. It is said that the albatross can forecast the weather changes of the ocean, so when the ocean-going fleet encounters the vagaries of the climate in the long ocean voyage, the albatross can lead the mariners to arrive at destination safely. At that time, people may not understand this phenomenon, but they knew that the albatross was a symbol of good luck for the vessels at sea, and perhaps it was their only hope. The mariners were very pleased to see such an olive branch given by nature, "At length did cross an Albatross,/Thorough the fog it came ;/As if it had been a Christian soul,/We hailed it in God's name." The mariners gave it the food that it had never eaten, and played with it. In return, the albatross guided the mariners, "The ice did split with a thunder-fit; /The helmsman steered us through!" The albatross perched on the mast for several days, during which period the weather was suitable for their voyage.

What the first part of the poetry displayed is that the early human being possessed a kind of instinctive reliance on nature. When they encountered bad weather, the

mariners could only passively wait for a good weather, or expect the arrival of albatross. Because the human being was ignorant in the early stage, they could not find good explanations for the different natural phenomena, their mind was filled with different imagination and they believed there existed unknown magic power in nature. As an ordinary existence of the world, human being relied on the protection of nature, and nature protected the human being unselfishly, even if the worst environment can not destroy the human being. People were in awe of nature at that time.

## 2. VAIN ATTEMPT TO CONQUER NATURE, BUT RETALIATED

Due to some unknown reason, the ancient mariner killed the albatross, and then the bad weather started. The other mariners believed that "I had done a hellish thing, /And it would work 'em woe: /For all averred, I had killed the bird/That made the breeze to blow. /Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, /That made the breeze to blow!" However, "Nor dim nor red, like God's own head, /The glorious Sun uprist: /Then all averred, I had killed the bird/That brought the fog and mist. /'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,/That bring the fog and mist." At this time, the other mariners suddenly realized that people could conquer nature, they gave up the belief that killing an albatross would bring them bad luck, but they did not realize that when human beings tried to conquer nature, they also entered into an antagonistic situation against nature. The completely different attitudes of the mariners lay a hint of the disaster for themselves, and also present people's self-righteous and self-centered ignorance.

After the ancient mariner killed the albatross, the weather kept fine for a period, "The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,/The furrow followed free", but soon the weather changed and nature's revenge began. The vessel intruded into a quiet sea, and the mariners "were the first that ever burst/Into that silent sea." They broke the silence here. Obviously, nature was unhappy with the intrusion of human being, therefore, "Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,/'Twas sad as sad could be". After that, all the surroundings became abnormal: the Sun was bloody, "All in a hot and copper sky," "No bigger than the Moon"; water was everywhere, "Nor any drop to drink"; the sea rot, "slimy things did crawl with legs/Upon the slimy sea"; "The death-fires danced at night;/The water, like a witch's oils,/Burnt green, and blue and white"; while the mariners' "every tongue, through utter drought,/Was withered at the root ;/We could not speak, no more than if/We had been choked with soot." At this point, "what evil looks/Had I from old and young!" They no longer praised the murder of the albatross by the ancient mariner, but "Instead of the cross, the Albatross/About my neck was hung", they realize that the consequence of destroying

nature is malignant; they had to suffer the retaliation from nature, and taste the bitter fruit planted by themselves.

When the mariners suffered a lot and could not move, the ancient mariner found something coming near to them. In order to report the good news to others, he bit his arm, sucked some blood and shouted, "A sail! a sail!" But eventually they found it was "Death" and her sister "Life-in-death" that were on board. They were casting dice, and "Life-in-death" won the ancient mariner's life, while other mariners "One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,/ Too quick for groan or sigh,/ Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,/ And cursed me with his eye." The lonely ancient mariner, together with the rotting sea and the 200 bodies whose eyes were widely open, he felt the great inner fear. When he was about to pray, he heard a curse from the dead bodies, the ancient mariner had suffered great torture.

The content from Part Two to the 11th stanza of Part Four are mainly about the consequences of killing the albatross by the ancient mariner. The balance between man and nature was ruined when people mercilessly conquered nature and the relationship between mankind and nature was changed into the revenged and the revenging from the conqueror and the conquered, and the human being suffered adverse consequences.

In Coleridge's age, Industrial Revolution has been successfully launched, and the great achievements made by mankind had made them unprecedented self-confident, they no longer regarded nature as their equality. In their eyes, nature no longer had the divine character, which, of course, could no longer cause their fear and respect.

### 3. REFLECTION

The ancient mariner awakened in nature's revenge and began to examine his own behavior. He hoped to live with nature in harmony, and could enjoy the pleasure of nature. So when he saw the water snakes, which he felt sick previously, the ancient mariner suddenly discovered the biological nausea was so wonderful, "I watched their rich attire: /Blue, glossy green, and velvet black, /They coiled and swam; and every track/Was a flash of golden fire." "O happy living things! no tongue/Their beauty might declare: /A spring of love gushed from my heart, /And I blessed them unaware: /Sure my kind saint took pity on me, /And I blessed them unaware." Then the beautiful feeling came to his mind, he began to realize that the beautiful part of life, and could not help blessing for the water snakes, which perhaps moved the God. At this time, the dead bird dropped down, the sense of guilt began to reduce in the ancient mariner's heart, and he fell asleep. When he woke up again, it rained, "My lips were wet, my throat was cold". The ancient mariner's plea moved God. In order to help the ancient mariner successfully return, at nights the dead bodies stood up to drive the vessel for him under the

magic power. During the day, the ship moved on with the help of the gods. Finally, when he approached the harbor, the ancient mariner met a hermit, who had maintained the most harmonious relationship with nature. With the help of the hermit, the ancient mariner finally returned to his country safely, but it was until he truly finished his story, he felt relieved. However, such penalty had been lingering in his heart since then. So when the ancient mariner felt suffering sometime, he had to alleviate the sense of guilt by telling his story to those who seemed to need to listen to this lesson again and again.

This part of the story is mainly about the ancient mariner's repenting the wrong deeds and passing on the lesson to the young generation. The real reason that nature retaliated should be the killing of the bird by the ancient mariner. As we all know, Christian tells us in the Creation that both nature and the human being are the creation of God, which means, they are equal. When the ancient mariner and his companions saw the albatross, they hailed it in the name of the God. Although there is a God in their hearts, the ancient mariner used "it", which is used to mention things instead of the human being when he referred to the "albatross" and the "water snake". However, when he spoke of the fellow mariners, he used "he", which was quite different from "it". But in the dialogue of the spirits, whether they mentioned the albatross, the sea and the moon, they all used "he" or "she". That is to say, in the spirits' eyes, no difference existed between human being and objects (Huo, 2004). God, the Creator, created everything equally, but it was the man who emphasized the difference existing in them. Due to such opinion, people could not treat nature equally and ruined nature as they like. When man arbitrarily destroyed nature, there often was a concept in their mind that nature had no soul. But in fact, every time when man won victory over nature, nature would make the appropriate response. The punishment made by nature to the man is very harsh in the story, that is, human being used two hundred mariners' lives to pay for one albatross's life. At last, only the ancient mariner was left alive to tell the lesson again and again, and passed on it from generation to generation. When the ancient mariner was in a coma, he once heard a dialogue between two supernatural spirits, in fact, these two spirits represent the justice and mercy of nature, which means when nature punishes man, at the same time, also protects man. This combination of these two aspects is a representative of nature's attitude to mankind, which presents us with a merciful nature. This poem shows readers a magic nature. (Zhao & Wang, 2001).

Compared to the ancient mariners, the young wedding guest was one of the ordinary people, but he was selected by the ancient mariners to accept the lesson, because in the ancient mariner eyes, "O sweeter than the marriage-feast, /'Tis sweeter far to me, /To walk together to the kirk/With a goodly company!--" "He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast." "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 listening to the lesson, the young wedding guest  
not only “Turned from the bridegroom’s door.” but also  
became a serious sensible man. The ancient mariner gives  
him a lesson by the story.

Man and nature are the two indispensable parts that  
constitute the universe. Concerning about nature also  
means concerning about ourselves. In order to survive  
or develop, man can transform and make use of nature  
in a certain range, but man should not treat nature  
as something that can be arbitrarily overridden. Any  
destruction on nature is doomed to get punishment.

As for the relationship between man and nature,  
Engels once warned us not to enjoy our victory over  
nature, for nature would take revenge for any victory  
we have made. Indeed we got what we had expected in  
every victory, but later, or later after later we found the  
final result diminished what we had expected. Damage  
to our homestead would certainly threaten our own  
existence and development. Therefore, it has become  
a grave task to harmonize man and nature in the social  
development study. Now in an era when the relationship  
between man and nature is becoming tenser, we can feel  
a lot from the account of changeable relationship between  
man and nature in the process of the man’s growth if we

read the story again. It not only contains the relationship  
between man and nature in the past, but also reveals  
the deteriorating situation of the present age, and at the  
same time, also looks to the bright future between man  
and nature. The poet refused to regard nature as a purely  
natural object, and warn people to treat nature with  
hospitality. The hope for the harmonious coexistence in  
the beautiful future makes the poem a warning for the  
whole humanity.

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