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Contemporary and Universal: A Case Study of Themes in Coleridge's Masterpiece- the Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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ABSTRACT

Poetry has been defined as 'spontaneous overflow' of emotions by the great Romantic poet William Wordsworth. By this very definition emotions, which are integral parts of human beings, make poetry universally relevant. And yet its universality and relevance are often questioned in contemporary times by many, especially in the context of poetry of the past. Moreover, in the teaching and learning context, poetry is often considered to be rather impractical and unable to impart skills which are really needed on the ground. Students often deem poetry as a luxury or just an extra. So has poetry lost its relevance? Poetry not only is a treasure trove of emotions and literary expressions, it deals with multiple themes which are relevant, contemporary and universal. This paper aims to examine the relevance of poetry in the context of contemporary times and pedagogy through the study of some of the universal and contemporary themes taking S. T. Coleridge's masterpiece The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as a case study.

1. Introduction

The Literature of any language is a reflection of the times mirroring the social and political issues prevalent. Thus any piece of literature is an important historical document of that time. Apart from this, human behavior and emotions are deeply involved with it. Moreover, an evolution of language through experimentation also occurs simultaneously resulting in the enrichment of the language. Lastly, literature unleashes creativity and encourages analysis. Both creativity and analytical skills are highly rated skills that are admired and considered to be relevant universally. Fiction, drama and poetry being the

primary genres of literature, incorporate all of the above. However, in contemporary times, often it is claimed that literature in these genres has become redundant and obsolete. So its study both in academic and non-academic contexts is deemed to be a superfluous act. This is particularly said about poetry on account of its lyrical and musical qualities and also at times for its usage of archaic language.

There can be no doubt that poetry opens new vistas before the eyes of its readers not only through the magnificent use of the language it is written in, but also through the insight into the emotions, opinions and perceptions of the writer as well as the times. Be it the last line of the *Ode to the West Wind* by Shelley, 'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?' (Shelley, 70), or the yearning of Keats in his poem *Ode to a Nightingale* to escape the physical world where humans are afflicted by palsy and youth dies soon 'Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies' (Keats, 25-26), poetry has multiple themes which have been and still are relevant to human beings. Apart from these, as mentioned in this paper, through poetry the intricacies of the human mind can be opened not only to lay readers but also professionals like psychiatrists. All this has been examined in this paper in the context of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In the teaching and learning context, poetry relates to analysis, evaluation and eventually creation, three of the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomyⁱ. So why the aspersion that poetry is not relevant or practical whether thematically or pedagogically? Doesn't the message of hope (Shelley, *Ode to the West Wind*) matter to all? Doesn't every individual at times feel the need to escape into another dimension (Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*)? Don't students learn to analyze, evaluate and even create poetry and don't these skills manifest into skills related to their professions and society?

This study focuses on contemporary and universal themes in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by S. T. Coleridge, a first generation Romantic poet, which make the poem eternally relevant.

Summary of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

The Rimeⁱⁱ opens with an old Mariner stopping a Wedding Guest who is on his way to a wedding. The Mariner wants to tell a tale to this man although the latter is most reluctant to listen. Thus begins this poem going into a flashback. The Mariner relates his own experiences of his journey from his hometown. He describes the commencement of his voyage from the harbor leaving behind familiar sights of a hill and a church. A pleasant wind takes it along to the south. The ship reaches the polar region and gets stuck in the relentless spread of polar ice. The Mariner describes the horror of the situation when the sailors are doomed to die in the ship which could not move. However, suddenly, an albatross flies in like an angel and the sailors are deeply intrigued with it. Just as suddenly, the ice breaks and the ship becomes mobile once more and sails out of the polar area driven by a pleasant breeze. The Albatross keeps coming back to the sailors every day for nine days. It is fed by the mariners and plays with them. Inexplicably, the Mariner takes his crossbow and shoots the creature down.

His crime is first condemned by his colleagues and then hailed. Once they believe that he had killed the albatross which had arrived as a good omen, delivering the ship from the clutches of killer ice. But soon after, they change their mind and say that the Mariner had done a good deed, now believing the albatross to be a symbol of evil.

From the incident of the killing, a never ending procession of supernatural events follow. The ship encounters a magical bark with two characters on board, death and life-in-death. The two play a dice game wagering the lives of the Mariner and those of other sailors against each other. Life-in- death wins the Mariner's life and hence all the other sailors die, leaving the Mariner as the sole character on board. The Mariner's life becomes an accursed one because he is subjected to guilt and the accusing eyes of all the dead bodies strewn around him.

The Mariner's struggle is endless. The water around the ship becomes a witch's cauldron and slimy creatures swim all around. It is only after the Mariner's spontaneous blessing of the natural creatures around him that the curse on him begins to lift. He now gains the ability to pray and his thirst is quenched by heavy rainfall. The albatross that was hung around his neck by his colleagues like a cross, also drops into the sea.

The Mariner sees his fellow sailors rising and getting about their chores around the ship. He also notices angels guarding each of the dead bodies and singing ethereal songs. The ship heads back to his hometown from where it had sailed. Nearing the shore he notices a skiff with three characters on it. The ship suddenly cracks and sinks but the Mariner is rescued by the people from the boat. He meets a hermit there who asks him about his story. The Mariner feels the urge to tell his tale and is much relieved after doing so. The telling of his story with its ultimate message of love of nature, becomes the Mariner's primary penance. Henceforth, he goes around the world and relates his tale to every third man he meets.

Significance of nature

The main premise of the Rime, in true Romantic tradition, is the admiration of and reverence for nature. Like the fellow Romantic poets, Coleridge too equates nature to the presence of God on earth. As a result the crime against nature is crime against God. Thus there is a comparison of the albatross's dead body to the Cross borne by Jesus Christ. Coleridge awards it the same magnitude as that of the Cross which according to Christian belief surely is the burden of all the sins of the world. After the killing of the albatross, another punishment that the Mariner faces is his inability to pray. This, according to Coleridge, is a great punishment.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;

But or ever a prayer had gusht,

A wicked whisper came, and made

My heart as dry as dust. (Rime Part IV, 244-247)

His act against nature closes all the ways to salvation for the Mariner at this juncture. It is only after when he, inadvertently and spontaneously blesses the

slimy creatures, who are symbols of nature, swimming around the ship, that the albatross slips away from his neck, he is granted the gift of sleep, the rain drenches him and quenches his thirst and he is back to his own country and finally is able to pray. Multiple rewards for one act of showing love for nature!

*We drifted o'er the harbor-bar,
And I with sobs did pray—
O let me be awake, my God!
Or let me sleep away. (Rime Part VI, 468-471)*

Christopher Stokes, in his article, *My Soul in Agony": Irrationality and Christianity in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* mentions:

[...] the sleepless agony-one of the central trials undergone by the Mariner-is broken by the ability to pray. [...] –the fact that the curse involves an inability to pray, and is lifted by the making of prayer, in incontrovertible (Stokes, 2011, p 7).

The preservation of nature and the consequences of not adhering to this was a primary concern of Coleridge according to the Rime. The situation is no different today; preservation of nature is one of the most important responsibilities of all human beings.

Nature's Revenge

Kimberley Zins, in her article, *'Equilibrium in Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'* makes a mention of the vendetta nature unleashes on all and sundry, in this case the Mariner and also his fellow sailors. She writes:

After the Mariner kills the albatross, vengeance begins. The wind abandons the ship. [...] Their water supply diminishes. [...] The vast sea surrounds the crew, but the dehydrated men are unable to drink the salt water available. (Zins, 2008, p.194)

Nature's vengeance is one of the most contemporary issues that mankind is facing. The havoc environmental changes have wreaked are for all to see. The depletion of the rainforests, the extinction of several species, and the pollution of all elements are evident and ominous. The results of all these atrocities are also equally evident. The raging and uncontrollable bush fires, the holes in the ozone layer and the on-going pandemic are all repercussions of the destruction of nature's phenomenal balance. At the center of it all, the perpetrator of this havoc is none other than man. Coleridge too indicates this in his poem in the 19th century when environmental issues were not so acute. So in Coleridge we not only see an able poet but also a visionary who can see ahead. Man's irresponsibility, as seen in the Mariner, ultimately leads to disaster.

Alan D. Hecht and Joseph Fiksel, in their article *Solving the problems we face: the United States environmental Protection Agency, sustainability, and the challenges of the twenty-first century* clearly mention the urgency of the environmental issues in the twenty-first century. They write:

It is abundantly clear today that the world faces a growing number of problems related to climate change, population growth, expanded industrial development, and urban development. A report from global Footprint Network estimated that, if current trends continue, by the 2030s we will need the

equivalent of two Earths to support the world's population (Hecht & Fiksel, 2015, p. 82).

The above mentioned article paints a devastating picture of the eventuality that the human race faces in view of the onslaught on nature by human hand. Isn't it the same message that Coleridge gives in his poem? The 'urban development' mentioned here is reflective of the impact of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries which probably were the first steps towards environmental disaster of today. The Romantic poets were influenced by the ongoing industrialization of the time and the role of human beings in ravaging nature and thus their aversion to city life and love of the rustic. Through the Mariner, who is the representative of the human race, Coleridge exhibits his fear for the natural world.

Furthermore, Hecht and Fiksel reiterate the need to learn from mistakes of the past and also write how infrequent this is in actuality so that man makes the same mistakes repeatedly. Coleridge, through his immortal poem too raises alarm about the consequences of messing with nature.

Water Crisis

Constant human intervention with nature has brought the modern world to the brink of a water crisis. It is even said that the next world war is likely to be because of water shortage. Water tables have dropped in many countries and cities. In some backward countries, it is a daily struggle to get potable water and people, especially women, have to walk miles to get water. Coleridge, in Rime has hinted at this in his ironic presentation where the sailors despite being surrounded by water, have no water to drink.

*Water, water, every where
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where
Nor any drop to drink. (Rime part II, 119-122)*

He has vividly expressed the horror of this in the swollen and dry tongues of the sailors who cannot even speak because of lack of moisture. In fact, the horror is extended further when the Mariner, in order to express his excitement, has to bite his hand and draw blood so that his lips are wet and his tongue is enabled to speak with the moisture of his own blood. What can be more horrible?

*I bit my arm, I sucked my blood,
And cried, A sail! a sail! (Rime Part III, 160-161)*

About this Kimberly Zins writes:

The Shrunken boards making up the ship illustrate the lack of drinking water and equality. [...] Even though the ocean is water, the salt in the ocean robs the ship of all moisture, causing its wooden planks to "shrink" (120). The ship, personifying people who require pure water, is leached of its palatable water supply by the hypertonic solution of the salty ocean. [...] The seaman withers

away physically and psychologically in the same manner that the wooden planks shrink because of lack of water. (Zins, 2008, p. 194-195)

The above point is reiterated by Jennifer Couzin in her article *Forecast for Global water Shortage* and she uses the words of Coleridge to drive home the seriousness of the situation and also endorses the vision of Coleridge for a monumental prediction of future dearth of this life saving element.

“Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink”: Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s words presaged a damning new report that predicts an impending global water crisis [...] by 2025 more than a third of the world’s population could suffer shortages of fresh water for drinking and irrigation (Couzin, 1998, p. 1795).

Tales as metaphor for journey of life

We live by tales and also die by them. Our lives are tales and every day we find ourselves entrenched in tales. We also love to hear and, in the modern context, watch tales. Soap operas and multiplexes are teeming with tales which we devour and revere because of how they relate to our lives. The Rime is a tale which the mariner is bound to tell. Anne Williams in her article *An I for an Eye: “Spectral Persecution” in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* writes:

The tale begins with an unquestionable first premise: “There was a ship” (10). The vessel setting out on its journey constitutes a basic metaphor for the body beginning life. The ship’s movements follow the pulsions and rhythms of fluid, preoedipal drives of the semiotic chora. (Williams, 1993, p. 1116)

The story of the Mariner begins in a usual way like so many other tales told and retold through lifetimes. Moreover, like most tales, this story too is like a story of a journey through life. For the Mariner, the events of this journey are of utmost importance because he gets the most significant lessons from it. Tales are relevant to human lives and are often reflections of the eternal journey of life with a significant moral at the end. This relevance has not waned in contemporary times.

Religion, Sin & Penance

Religion and spirituality are not far from contemporary life. Despite the degeneration of values in society as claimed by many, religion and religious places of worship are many. Be it a mosque, church, synagogue, monastery or temple, they are increasing in numbers steadily along with related disputes. However, religion and spirituality are basic needs and are intrinsically entrenched with the concepts of sin and penance.

Coleridge has incorporated all the above mentioned concepts in the Rime. Along with the narration of the Mariner, travels a religious theme. He leaves the ‘kirk’ behind in his home country. The albatross accompanies the ship for ‘vespers nine’. The albatross is hung around the Mariner’s neck just as the cross was carried by Jesus Christ:

Ah wel-a-day! what evil looks

Had I from old and young

Instead of the Cross the Albatross

About my neck was hung (Rime Part, 135-138)

The albatross also is described as a Christian soul by Coleridge:

*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. (Rime Part I, 63-66)*

Lastly, in his final message, the Mariner claims to prefer to pray rather than attend a mundane affair like the wedding. He thus proceeds to pray after having relieved himself by telling his tale to the Wedding Guest. The poem definitely gives a very potent religious message:

*O sweeter than the marriage-feast
'Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk
With a goodly company!—(Rime Part VII, 601-604)*

Coleridge, through the Mariner, emphasizes the strength of togetherness and congregation. He does not only propagate religious fervor in isolation but with all. The Mariner says:

*To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends
And youths and maiden gay! (Rime Part VII, 605-609)*

Sin is a universal theme. Something which has been and will be prevalent in human life. The perception about sin might have changed over a period of time i. e. what was considered to be an act of sin may not be so now. However, sin exists.

Harry White in his article *Coleridge's Uncertain Agony* acknowledges the crime committed by the Mariner and the punishment meted out to him. He also mentions the moral that Coleridge is trying to convey through the poem.

A mariner tells a tale of crime and punishment in an attempt to validate the chronic feelings of remorse from which he suffers and to project a sense of moral order onto the otherwise senselessly traumatic events that he had experienced. (White, 2009, p. 807)

Sin, therefore is an important theme in the Rime. The killing of the albatross surely is a glaring example of a sin. It is more so since there is no motive or rationality behind this sinister act. About the sudden killing of the albatross, Christopher Stokes in his article "My Soul in Agony": *Irrationality and Christianity in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* further writes:

Thus, from the outset a relatively realistic travel narrative is contaminated by strangeness: fantastic, as we have already suggested or uncanny in the sense Freud gave it. It is within this already disoriented field that the crucial moment of the narrative occurs: the slaying of the albatross. There are two especially strange elements to this killing. Firstly, as many critics have pointed out, it

happens without any apparent foresight or motive. In one stanza, the Mariner is describing vespers in the moonlight; in the next, the wedding guest is shocked by the terror in the Mariner's face; the killing simply happens (Stokes, 2011, p. 5).

Along with sin is undeniably joined the concept of guilt which eventually leads to penance. These are phenomena which are timeless and no one can claim that they are not relevant in today's context. My assertion is that they are more relevant today than before considering the moral degradation we witness. Coleridge has explicitly expressed the guilt of the Mariner which emerged from his own heart after the mindless killing of the albatross but was also driven firmly into his spirit by the death of his fellow sailors and then by the relentless gaze of the dead men.

*The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
Nor rot nor reek did they:
The look with which they looked on me
Had never passed away. (Rime Part IV, 253-256)*

The Mariner is assaulted by the horrible curse of those penetrating eyes and compares it with the curse of an orphan. Coleridge uses an extremely potent comparison to convey the guilt felt by the Mariner. He almost prays for death rather than be exposed to such accusatory eyes.

*An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! More horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die. (Rime Part IV, 257-262)*

After sin comes guilt and that leads to penance. The piercing gaze of the dead men hurl accusations at the Mariner but his penance comes from multiple quarters. Some he faces along with his fellow sailors e. g. the merciless thirst and some he faces on his own i. e. the guilt, loneliness and inability to pray. The most powerful among these is his loneliness. He is bereft of companionship, utterly alone and at the mercy of the elements with a hundred corpses at his feet.

*Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony. (Rime Part IV, 232-235)*

Passion

Humans are ruled by their so many passions. In fact, a person without a passion is hardly human. Moreover, there is the other meaning of passion which means the expression of extreme emotions. This too is an inherent trait of human beings.

Anne Williams in her article '*An I for an Eye: Spectral Persecution in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*' describes the poem as 'extravagantly disunified' She writes:

A disjointed, seven-part story, the ballad concerns an interrupted wedding and describes abrupt appearances and vanishings, intense, unmotivated passions. (Williams, 1993, p. 1115)

I would like to focus here that whether the poem can be considered to be disjointed is a matter for debate, but I whole heartedly agree that it is full of 'unmotivated passion'. Doesn't that make it so relevant, contemporary and eternal at the same time? Passions are timeless and so inherent to human beings and so often completely without instigation, in fact they are instinctive and spontaneous. How else can we explain the killing of the Albatross? The mariner just lifts his crossbow and kills the bird!

*With my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS. (Rime Part 1, 81-82)*

Human beings are liable to act in this way quite regularly from time immemorial. Our passions have driven us to do bizarre things. In fact, our passions make us human. Like all human beings, the Mariner is given to his passions. He begins with the passion which overtakes him and makes him kill the albatross. When he confronts the wedding guest, his passion seems to emit from his sharp eyes. At the end of the Rime, he acquires a passion for storytelling and also prayer. He is very human and this is what makes the poem so relevant through the ages.

Fickleness of Human Mind

Human beings are given to mood swings and erratic behavior. Coleridge has presented this strange dimension of human beings quite expertly. First example of it is the Mariner himself. He kills the albatross without motive and then feels guilty about it and does a life-long penance for it.

Harry White in his article *Coleridge's Uncertain Agony* further makes a connection between the mental state of a human being and its manifestation in acts of crime or sin and also guilt. He emphasizes the fact that often a mental disease may find expression in crime and the resultant guilt. This theory is prevalent in today's world as much as in the past. Crimes result from permanent or temporary insanity and so does guilt. However, according to White, Coleridge believed that mental disorder is not an excuse for sin or guilt and thus the perpetrator in no way is innocent. White writes:

Thus, the most disturbing development Coleridge faced was the emerging view that sensations of guilt and self-recrimination might be no more than symptoms of mental or physical disorder, and he steadfastly refused to believe that mental disorder was not a true indicator of sinfulness or that moral condemnation did

not in any way apply to those who suffered from mental disease. (White, 2009, p. 808)

Phobia

Modern psychology connects depression with guilt. Harry White further mentions:

As to the question of guilt, a highly regarded modern measure of depression could have based its findings on Coleridge's or his mariner's condition [...] (White, 2009, p. 809).

It is well documented that Coleridge was prone to panic attacks and was also in the habit of taking opium. Thus, the state of the human mind was close to his heart.

The Rime can be connected to the human mind in other ways too. Fear is evident in a large part of the poem. The Wedding Guest is fearful of the mad eyes and long beard of the Mariner. The Mariner too is afflicted with phenomenal fear on multiple occasions throughout his narration. Satyendra Singh and Abha Khetarpal in their article *Phobias in Poetry: Coleridge's Ancient Mariner*, have described the mental trauma and its repercussions with reference to the poem. They also connect the predicament of the Mariner and also the sailors with the opium induced hallucinatory episodes of Coleridge. They write:

Coleridge, the poet of this poem was a known user of opium. The delusions and hallucinations caused due to the drug seem to have forced him to write about some strange parts like the 'Voice of the Spirits' communicating with each other. Looking at the poem through the psychiatric and psychological domain, the symbolism, the narration and the entire setting of the poem represents Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Singh & Khetarpal, 2012, p. 194)

Thus the poem treads on the domain of modern psychiatry which is so connected with PTSD^{iiiiiv}, making it relevant to psychiatrists of today. The death of his fellow sailors and the sense of desolation thus unleashed along with the realization of his sin and the resultant guilt, further aggravate the symptoms of PTSD. Singh & Khetarpal connect the repetitious behavior of the Mariner in his narration of his story to multiple listeners with PTSD. They write:

Upon the death of his two hundred mates in Part III of the poem, he is psychologically deranged. The autonomic symptoms of PTSD clearly become visible here. There is frequent reliving of the events as the Mariner is compelled to repeat the events to whomsoever he met. There is a feeling of helplessness and entrapment (Singh & Khetarpal, 2012, p. 195).

One can only imagine the phobia that must have gripped the Mariner soon after the killing of the albatross and also when the other events unfolded. Starting with the accusations of the sailors, the arrival of the ghost bark, the dice game of the two horrible characters on board, the dying of the sailors, there is an endless procession of horrifying episodes. Thus, to be overcome by multiple phobias at this juncture is justified. A modern psychiatrist will decipher a plethora of relevant afflictions of the mind in the Mariner. Singh & Khetarpal further comment:

[...] the Mariner feels trapped. He suffers from Claustrophobia^v. The psychological strain reaches its extreme limit when even the Sun appears to be behind bars to the Mariner [...]. Another phobia which overtakes him is Stygiophobia^{vi}, an irrational fear of hell. Its symptoms are breathlessness, excessive sweating, dry mouth, nausea, feeling sick, heart palpitations, and inability to speak or think clearly, a fear of dying, a sensation of detachment from reality or an anxiety attack (Singh & Khetarpal, 2012, p.195).

The sailors are not too far away. After the dastardly act by the Mariner, they curse him first for his crime pointing out that the albatross was a good omen and had rescued them from the grip of polar ice. However, soon after, they hail the Mariner for killing the bird this time claiming that the albatross was the cause of their misery. About this Christopher Stokes writes:

At first, the crew believe the bird had brought the wind, and turn upon the Mariner for destroying a creature of good fortune. When the fog clears, however, they swiftly change their opinion and believe " 'T'was right...such bird to slay/That bring the fog and mist" (97-98). (Stokes, 2011, p. 97-98)

Conclusion:

Literature, be it drama, novel or poetry takes inspiration and ideas from real life. Often, these reflect the authors' experiences and emotions that may be personal but they are also universal. Untold number of human beings have gone through the same at different junctures of history. So how can something so intrinsic be deemed irrelevant or just a luxury? My article has proved how some of the most common aspects of human life are so well reflected in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by S. T. Coleridge. The repercussions of destruction of nature, the concepts of sin, guilt and punishment, the various layers of the human mind, both when it is sane and insane, human emotions and reactions, religion, the importance of stories both in their telling and listening/watching etc. are all universal and relevant to this day. Coleridge's Rime has displayed it with alacrity thus making the poem contemporary and eternal.

i See- <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>

ii The poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is referred to as Rime.

iii See- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>

iv See- <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/claustrophobia>

v See- <https://www.wordnik.com/words/stygiophoia>

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