

Course Title: Literary criticism

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An Assignment on :

Literary Criticism of the Rhyme of an Ancient Mariner by referring William
Wordsworth's Preface to literary ballads.

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Literary Criticism

Literary criticism is the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of works of literature. It's not just about saying whether you liked a book or not, but rather digging deeper to understand its meaning, methods, and impact.

A Look at Coleridge's "Rime" Through Wordsworth's Lens:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and William Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" stand as twin pillars of the Romantic movement. Published together in 1798, they represent a shared interest in the power of nature and the human spirit. However, examining "The Rime" through the lens of Wordsworth's preface to "Lyrical Ballads" reveals some intriguing points of convergence and divergence.

Supernatural for Emotional Impact:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" isn't just a thrilling seafaring adventure. It's a carefully crafted symphony of emotions, and the supernatural elements play a crucial role in conducting that symphony. Here's how Coleridge uses the fantastical to stir our hearts:

Heightened Stakes:

Imagine a world where nature reacts to your actions. The Mariner's killing of the albatross unleashes a curse, transforming a calm sea voyage into a terrifying ordeal. This supernatural element raises the stakes dramatically, making us fear for the Mariner's life and amplifying his sense of guilt.

A World of Wonder and Terror:

The poem introduces us to fantastical creatures like the Albatross, a symbol of good luck turned into a harbinger of doom. We encounter the spectral ship, a chilling embodiment of death, and the nightmarish figures of Life-in-Death and Death itself. These elements create a world of wonder and terror, keeping us on the edge of our seats and intensifying the Mariner's emotional journey.

Internal Conflict Made External:

The Mariner's guilt manifests in the form of the rotting Albatross that hangs around his neck. This externalization of his internal struggle allows us to viscerally experience his torment. It makes his eventual repentance and finding peace with the natural world all the more satisfying.

Universal Themes Through the Fantastic:

The curse and its consequences are more than just fantastical elements. They represent the universal themes of guilt, punishment, redemption, and our connection to nature. By using the supernatural, Coleridge makes these abstract ideas more relatable and emotionally resonant. Coleridge doesn't rely solely on the supernatural for emotional impact. The poem is filled with vivid descriptions and heart-wrenching moments like the death of the albatross chicks and the suffering of the crew. However, the supernatural elements act as a powerful amplifier, taking the emotional range of the poem to a whole new level. They draw us into the Mariner's world, make us feel his despair, and ultimately, celebrate his redemption.

Emotional power:

The emotional power of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is undeniable. Coleridge weaves a spellbinding tale that tugs at our heartstrings in a multitude of ways. Here's a deeper dive into the emotional landscape of the poem:

The Descent into Despair:

Guilt's Corrosive Grip: The Mariner's act of killing the albatross unleashes a curse, and his guilt manifests as a physical burden – the rotting Albatross around his neck. We witness his descent into despair as the sun becomes his enemy, and the once-joyful crew is reduced to skeletal figures. This descent evokes a sense of shared suffering, pulling us into the Mariner's emotional turmoil.

Isolation and Alienation:

Cursed by his actions, the Mariner becomes isolated. His fellow sailors turn on him, blaming him for their misfortune. This isolation amplifies his despair and loneliness, a feeling many readers can relate to.

Loss and Longing:

The Mariner witnesses the death of his shipmates, the only companions on his voyage. This loss fuels his longing for connection and a return to normalcy, emotions that resonate with anyone who has experienced loss.

The Glimmer of Hope and Redemption:

Finding Beauty in the Desolate: Amidst the despair, the Mariner observes the beauty of water snakes, a moment that sparks a shift. This act of finding beauty in the unexpected ignites a flicker of hope within him.

The Power of Blessing: When the Mariner blesses the water snakes, the curse begins to lift. This small act of kindness, a recognition of the interconnectedness of nature, becomes a turning point in his emotional journey.

Shared Suffering Leads to Shared Redemption: The Mariner's act of blessing unknowingly breaks the curse binding the spectral crew. This shared act of redemption highlights the importance of connection and forgiveness, offering a powerful emotional payoff.

The Enduring Impact:

A Haunting Legacy: Even after gaining redemption, the Mariner is forever marked by his experience. The wedding guest's fear and fascination with the tale underscore the lasting impact of the Mariner's journey. This lingering effect stays with the reader as well, prompting us to ponder the consequences of our actions.

A Reminder of Hope: Despite the darkness, the poem ultimately offers a glimmer of hope. The Mariner's redemption shows that even in the face of despair, there is the possibility of forgiveness and healing. This message resonates with readers, offering a sense of comfort and optimism. The emotional power of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" lies in its ability to tap into universal human experiences: guilt, isolation, loss, and the desire for redemption. By portraying these emotions in such a vivid and dramatic way, Coleridge creates a lasting impact on the reader.

Overt Morality:

The issue of overt morality in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a point of contention. While the poem clearly conveys a moral message about respecting nature and the consequences of transgression, some aspects can be seen as a bit heavy-handed. Here's a breakdown of both sides:

Clear Lesson: There's no mistaking the poem's central message – harming nature has dire consequences. The Mariner's suffering directly stems from his needless killing of the albatross, a symbol of good luck and balance in the natural world. This clarity ensures readers understand the moral weight of the story.

Universality: The focus on respecting nature taps into a universal human concern – our connection to the environment. This broadens the poem's appeal and makes the moral message relevant to a wide audience.

Against Overt Morality:

Didactic Tone: The framing narrative with the Wedding Guest and the glosses can feel preachy. They tell us what to learn from the story rather than letting the narrative unfold organically. This can make the poem feel less like a captivating story and more like a moral lesson.

Subtlety vs. Bluntness: Some argue that the emotional impact is stronger when the moral is implicit. The raw portrayal of the Mariner's suffering could be enough to convey the dangers of harming nature, without the need for explicit pronouncements.

Coleridge's View: Interestingly, Coleridge himself later expressed reservations about the overt morality in "The Rime." He felt it might detract from the poem's emotional power.

Accessibility in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: A Balancing Act

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a cornerstone of Romantic poetry. However, its accessibility can be a challenge for modern readers. Let's explore the factors that affect accessibility and how the poem navigates them:

Challenges to Accessibility:

Archaic Language: The poem uses language from the late 18th century, including vocabulary and sentence structures that might be unfamiliar to modern readers. Words like "eftsoons" (immediately) and "whistles wan" (pale whistles) require effort to understand

Ballad Form: The ballad meter, with its specific rhyme scheme and rhythm, can feel sing-songy and repetitive to modern ears. It might not resonate as readily with readers accustomed to free verse or contemporary styles.

Supernatural Elements: While the fantastical elements like the albatross and spectral ship contribute to the poem's power, they can also create a barrier for readers who prefer more grounded narratives.

Strategies for Accessibility:

Vivid Imagery: Coleridge excels at creating vivid imagery with words. Descriptions like "water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink" are powerful and transcend the limitations of time.

Universal Themes: The poem explores themes of guilt, punishment, redemption, and connection to nature, which resonate with readers across generations.

Dramatic Storytelling: The narrative arc of the Mariner's journey, from transgression to redemption, is inherently captivating. The suspense and emotional intensity keep readers engaged.

Modern Interpretations:

Annotations and Explanations: Modern editions often include annotations that explain archaic words and phrases, making the poem more accessible to new readers.

Audio Recordings: Listening to recordings of the poem read aloud can help overcome the challenges of unfamiliar language and meter. The rhythm and emphasis can bring the story to life and enhance understanding.

Wordsworthian Romanticism: While Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is often seen as part of the Romantic movement alongside William Wordsworth's work, it pushes beyond the typical boundaries of Romanticism. Here's why "The Rime" stands out:

Nature as a Source of Beauty and Comfort: For Wordsworth, nature is a source of inspiration, solace, and spiritual connection. While Coleridge appreciates the beauty of the natural world, his portrayal is more complex. The ocean in "The Rime" can be both majestic and terrifying, reflecting the emotional turmoil of the Mariner

Coleridge's Distinctive Elements:

Exploration of the Darker Psyche: Romantics often celebrated the power of the human imagination. However, "The Rime" delves deeper, exploring the darker aspects of the human psyche. The Mariner's guilt, isolation, and descent into madness are not typical Romantic themes.

Supernatural for Suspense and Ambiguity: Wordsworth's focus is often on the natural world. In contrast, Coleridge uses the supernatural elements in "The Rime" to create suspense and ambiguity. The spectral ship and the question of whether the events are real or a figment of the Mariner's tortured mind leave the reader questioning.

The Question of Morality: Wordsworth's Romanticism often embraces a connection to nature and a simpler way of life. "The Rime" presents a moral message, but it's not always clear-cut. The question of whether the Mariner's actions deserve such a harsh punishment adds a layer of complexity.

Coleridge and the Gothic: The poem's exploration of the supernatural, the dark and desolate landscapes, and the psychological torment of the Mariner all point towards the Gothic genre, which emerged alongside Romanticism. "The Rime" reflects this emerging fascination with the darker side of human experience.

Conclusion: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a rich tapestry woven from elements of Romanticism, the Gothic, and Coleridge's own unique vision. It transcends the limitations of a single genre, offering a complex exploration of human nature, morality, and the power of the imagination. While it shares some themes with Wordsworthian Romanticism, it delves deeper into the psyche and the supernatural, making it a truly unique and enduring