

Study of Romantic Poetry

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by S.T. Coleridge

Literary Context

The first version of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” appeared in a volume titled *Lyrical Ballads*, which was published in 1798. This volume resulted from a collaboration between Coleridge and his close friend William Wordsworth. To the second edition of the volume, published in 1800, Wordsworth added a preface in which he outlined the broad aim of their project. Their primary goal, he explains, was to move poetry beyond the stilted and inaccessible forms that had dominated the previous century. Instead of lifeless, alienating, formal verse, they proposed a new poetry that featured a simpler, more natural language. Such naturalistic language could infuse poetry with new vitality, particularly when used to express the emotions of a first-person speaker. These claims arguably apply more to Wordsworth’s contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. After all, Coleridge’s poems featured deliberately archaic language that jarred against Wordsworth’s claim to naturalism. In “Rime,” however, Coleridge does center a first-person speaker, and he also stretches the traditional ballad form, rendering it flexible enough to accommodate his protagonist’s waxing and waning emotions. In doing so, Coleridge helped set the tone for the era we know as “Romanticism,” the unofficial beginning of which was marked by the publication of this landmark volume.

Historical Context

Despite being written during a time when Britain was engaged in the French Revolutionary Wars, the Irish Rebellion, and the Anglo-Spanish wars, *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* is not regarded as overt in its themes of war or politics. This stands in contrast to some of Coleridge's other writing of this era. While Coleridge was not an unaware observer of world events, *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* is more often viewed as a response to the Industrial Revolution and the move away from nature towards cities and the increased use of technology.

Summary (Part 1)



The Ancient Mariner, an old man with a grey beard and a “glittering eye,” stops one out of three young men who are on their way to a wedding. The man whom the Mariner stopped, the Wedding Guest, explains that the wedding is about to start, but the Mariner ignores the wedding guest and begins his tale anyway with the simple line, “There was a ship.” The Wedding Guest tries again to get out of hearing the story, but the Mariner holds him spellbound with his eye, his hand, and his powerful storytelling ability. The Wedding Guest is forced to listen to the Mariner’s tale.

The Mariner then launches into the story of his experiences at sea, describing how the ship itself launched into the sea and sailed southward—he indicates the direction by describing the path of the sun. When merry sounds are heard from the wedding feast, the Wedding Guest once more tries to escape the Mariner’s tale, but he remains enthralled.

After the Wedding Guest quiets down again, the Mariner's story moves on to the great storm, which pushed the ship towards the South Pole. There he and the other Sailors are surrounded by ice, mist, and snow. There is a complete lack of life, but also a sense of the sublime in the vast icebergs and glaciers they pass. The only noise is the haunting sound of ice cracking all around the ship.

This silence and lack of life is broken, however, by an Albatross, which the crew hails as if it were a Christian, and believes to be a sign of good luck. They feed the bird, which follows them and visits to eat and play, and the Sailors all rejoice at the newly blowing wind (which they attribute to the bird) that allows them to begin heading north again. But amidst this joyous celebration of the bird, the Wedding Guest suddenly interjects into the story, revealing that while telling this part of his tale the Mariner looks like he is greatly plagued by fiends. The Mariner then shares his tragic mistake and great sin without giving any indication of the reason he did it: with his cross-bow, he shot the Albatross.

Analysis

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge is rich with Romantic characteristics, including a deep respect for nature, the supernatural, and the elevation of the common man. The poem explores themes of duality, sin, repentance, and the interconnectedness of all living things, emphasizing the moral that humans must respect all of nature as part of God's creation. Supernatural elements, such as the ghost ship and the albatross, symbolize the consequences of violating natural harmony. Ultimately, the mariner's redemption comes through recognizing the beauty in God's creatures.

Sources

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