

Major Themes in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

Redemption

Redemption is a central theme in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The poem explores the Mariner's journey from sin to redemption, highlighting the consequences of his actions and his eventual spiritual awakening. Through the Mariner's tale, Coleridge emphasizes the importance of recognizing the beauty and sanctity of all living things as part of God's creation. The Mariner's redemption is achieved through his newfound appreciation for nature, his ability to pray, and his acceptance of his penance.

The Mariner's path to redemption begins with his senseless act of killing the albatross, which brings dire consequences upon him and his crew. This act symbolizes a violation of natural harmony, leading to a series of supernatural events that reflect his inner turmoil. The Mariner's journey is marked by suffering and isolation, as he is forced to confront the consequences of his actions. The recurring imagery of the dead sea and rotting matter serves as a reflection of the decay within the Mariner himself, symbolizing his spiritual corruption. As the Mariner begins to see the beauty in the "happy living things" around him, he experiences a change of heart. This newfound appreciation for nature allows him to pray, leading to the symbolic fall of the albatross from his neck. This moment marks the beginning of his redemption, as he acknowledges the interconnectedness of all living things and the divine presence in nature. The Mariner's ability to sleep peacefully signifies his progress towards spiritual renewal.

The Mariner's redemption is not complete until he accepts his penance, which involves sharing his tale with others. He is compelled to tell his story to those who need to hear it, serving as a reminder of the consequences of disrespecting nature. This act of storytelling becomes a form of penance, allowing the Mariner to find solace and redemption through his confession. His tale serves as a cautionary reminder of the importance of respecting all of God's creations.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

Nature

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" explores the theme of nature through the mariner's journey, emphasizing the importance of respecting all living things. Coleridge uses the mariner's experiences to highlight humanity's relationship with the natural world, illustrating the consequences of disrupting this harmony. The poem serves as an allegorical tale, warning against the destructive tendencies of mankind and advocating for a renewed respect for nature.

The mariner's impulsive killing of the albatross symbolizes humanity's disregard for nature. Initially, the albatross is seen as a good omen, bringing favorable winds. However, when the wind ceases, the mariner blames and kills the bird, an act of disrespect towards nature. This action brings misfortune upon the mariner and his crew, illustrating the consequences of disrupting the natural order. The mariner's guilt and penance highlight the need for respect toward all living creatures.

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. (609-614)

The mariner learns to appreciate nature through his suffering. His journey to redemption begins when he unknowingly blesses the water snakes, creatures he once found repulsive. This act signifies a newfound respect for nature, leading to the albatross falling from his neck. The mariner's tale becomes a lesson for others, emphasizing the importance of loving and respecting all of God's creations.

Coleridge's use of imagery and personification enhances the theme of nature. Vivid descriptions of the natural world, such as the water snakes and the harsh conditions faced by the crew, underscore the beauty and power of nature. Personification of elements like the wind and sun further emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things and the need for reverence towards nature.

The poem serves as an allegory for the destructive relationship between mankind and nature, reflecting concerns of the Romantic period. The mariner's journey symbolizes a spiritual voyage, highlighting themes of sin, penance, and redemption. The albatross represents the consequences of disrupting the natural order, and the mariner's eventual enlightenment conveys moral lessons about the importance of respecting nature.

Mystery and the Supernatural

The mystery of the poem is increased by the frequent appearance (and equally abrupt disappearance) of angels and other supernatural beings. The mariner reassures the wedding guest by telling him that the reanimated corpses of the crew were not simply dead bodies returned to life, but were inhabited by angels, as though this is somehow less frightening. Later in his story, when the mariner is in sight of home, the bodies lie still, but each one has a glowing angel standing on it, to guide the pilot to the ship with their lights. The two voices the mariner hears in his stupor, which discuss his sin and penance, appear to be similar celestial beings. Even the sea snakes take on a supernatural significance, magically restoring to the mariner his ability to pray.

Guilt

The theme of guilt is central to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The mariner's impulsive act of killing the albatross sets off a chain of events that lead to profound guilt and suffering. This guilt is not only personal but shared among the crew, who initially condemn the mariner but later attempt to shift the blame entirely onto him. The mariner's guilt becomes a lifelong burden, compelling him to retell his story as a form of penance.

References

Cavendish-Jones, Colin. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner - Sin and Penance." *eNotes Publishing*, edited by eNotes Editorial, eNotes.com, Inc., 18 Nov. 2024
<<https://www.enotes.com/topics/rime-ancient-mariner/themes#themes-sin-and-penance>>