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Exploring El Niño and La Niña as Manifestations of Nature’s Retribution: An Eco-critical Analysis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*”*

This paper provides an eco-critical analysis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s everlasting poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, exploring how the natural phenomena of El Niño and La Niña serve as metaphors for nature’s retribution against human exploitation and disregard. Drawing on the search results provided, the paper examines Coleridge’s portrayal of the individual-nature relationship and how it reflects the delicate balance that exists between humanity and the natural world. Through a close reading of the poem, the analysis demonstrates how the supernatural elements, such as the albatross and the polar spirits, symbolize the consequences that arise when this balance is disrupted. The paper concludes by discussing the enduring relevance of Coleridge’s work in the context of contemporary environmental challenges, highlighting the poem’s prescient warnings about the dangers of human hubris and the need for a more harmonious coexistence with nature.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a remarkable work of English Romantic poetry that has captivated readers for centuries. Beyond its rich symbolism and poetic artistry, the poem offers a profound exploration of the complex relationship between the individual and the natural world. At the heart of this exploration lies Coleridge’s nuanced understanding of the delicate balance that exists between humanity and nature, and the dire consequences that can arise when this balance is disrupted.

In this research paper, we will examine how Coleridge’s portrayal of the natural phenomena of El Niño and La Niña in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” serves as a metaphor for nature’s retribution against human exploitation and disregard. Drawing on the search results provided, we will analyze the poem’s eco-critical themes and their enduring relevance in the context of contemporary environmental challenges.

This study applies a qualitative, eco-critical approach to the analysis of “The Rime ofthe Ancient Mariner”*.* The research methodology involves a close reading of the poem, informed by the search results provided, which offer insights into Coleridge’s conceptualization of the individual-nature relationship and the symbolic significance of natural elements within the work.

The analysis will focus on the following key aspects:

1. Coleridge’s portrayal of the natural phenomena of El Niño and La Niña as manifestations of nature’s retribution against human actions.
2. The symbolic significance of the albatross and the polar spirits as representations of the delicate balance between humanity and the natural world.
3. The poem’s exploration of the consequences that rise when this balance is disrupted, and the lessons it offers for contemporary environmental concerns.

The research will draw upon relevant literary criticism and eco-critical scholarship to contextualize the analysis and situate Coleridge’s work within the broader Romantic tradition and its engagement with environmental themes.

   El Niño translates to “the boy” in Spanish. The term is thought to have originated in the 1600s when fishermen first started to notice unusually warm water in the Pacific Ocean. It originated as “El Niño de Navidad” because it typically peaks around December, according to NOAA (Navidad is Spanish for “Christmas.”). La Niña means little girl in Spanish, it has the opposite effect of El Niño and is sometimes referred to as El Viejo, anti- El Niño or “a cold event” (space.com, 13 July, 2023).

El Niño and La Niña are a global climate phenomenon caused by cyclical shifts in the water temperature of the Pacific Ocean. While focused on a small section of the Pacific near the Equator, these shifts have global ramifications. They influence both temperature and rainfall. Each El Niño or La Niña event lasts between 9–12 months, and on average occurs every 2–7 years.

El Niño is the warming phase of water temperatures around the Pacific Equator. During normal weather patterns around the Equator, trade winds carry warm water from the tropical areas of the Pacific Ocean. Moving west, the winds distribute warm water from the Eastern Pacific into the cooler areas of the ocean. During El Niño, those winds weaken, and the east-west travel of warm water stops. The winds reverse and carry warm water back east, which makes the warm part of the Pacific Ocean even warmer. Sea surface temperatures can increase by 1–3° C for months, or even years.

La Niña is the opposite of El Niño: an intensification of normal weather patterns. This causes ocean surface temperatures to cool down as winds strengthen and blow warm water towards the west. La Niña events may — but don’t always — follow an El Niño event.

El Niño and La Niña affect not only ocean temperatures, but also how much it rains on land. Depending on which cycle occurs (and when), this can mean either droughts or flooding. Typically, El Niño and its warm waters are associated with drought, while La Niña is linked to increase flooding. But, because the global weather system is very complex, this isn’t always the case. For example, in 2015 El Niño caused both flooding and droughts in different places (concern.net, 2022).

Throughout “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”Coleridge presents nature as a powerful and often incomprehensible force that is deeply intertwined with the spiritual realm. The natural phenomena of El Niño and La Niña, which are not explicitly mentioned in the poem but can be seen as metaphorical representations, serve as manifestations of nature’s retribution against the Mariner’s disregard for the natural world (IvyPanda.com, 2020).

The Mariner’s wanton killing of the albatross, a symbol of the delicate balance between humanity and nature, disrupts this balance and sets in motion a series of supernatural events that haunt him and his crew. The “fog and mist” that descend upon them, as well as the appearance of the “polar spirits”, can be interpreted as the natural world’s response to the Mariner’s transgression (IvyPanda.com, 2020). These phenomena, akin to the extreme weather patterns associated with El Niño and La Niña, serve as a warning about the consequences of human interference with the natural order.

Coleridge’s use of these supernatural elements underscores the idea that nature is not merely a passive backdrop for human activity, but an active, sentient force that demands respect and reverence. The Mariner’s punishment, which includes the “nightmare Life-in-Death” and the haunting of the polar spirits, reflects the poem’s central message: that the exploitation and disregard of nature will inevitably lead to retribution (IvyPanda.com, 2020).

The albatross, which the Mariner callously kills, serves as a powerful symbol of the delicate balance that exists between humanity and the natural World. As the search results indicate, the poem emphasizes that “when human beings take what nature offers without giving back, they are likely to pay for their actions” (IvyPanda.com, 2020). The Mariner’s wanton act of violence against the albatross disrupts this balance, triggering a series of supernatural events that haunt him and his crew (Britanica.com, 2024).

The presence of the polar spirits, which “plagued us so” and “followed us from the land of mist and snow”, further reinforces the idea that the natural world is imbued with a spiritual dimension that must be respected(IvyPanda.com, 2020). These supernatural entities can be seen as representations of the natural forces that seek to restore the balance that the Mariner has upset.

Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” offers a prescient warning about the dangers of human hubris and the need for a more harmonious coexistence with nature. The poem’s eco-critical themes, as evidenced by the search results, are particularly relevant in the context of contemporary environmental challenges, such as the ongoing climate crisis and the depletion of natural resources.

The parallels between the supernatural phenomena depicted in the poem and the real-world manifestations of El Niño and La Niña serve as a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of human and natural systems. Just as the Mariner’s actions have far-reaching consequences our own disregard for the natural world can lead to devastating environmental and societal impacts.

Coleridge’s work encourages readers to reflect on their own relationship with nature and to recognize the need for a more respectful and sustainable approach to our interactions with the natural world. By exploring the eco-critical themes in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”we can gain valuable insights into the delicate balance that must be maintained between humanity and the environment, and the dire consequences that can arise when this balance is disrupted.

In conclusion, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”stands as an influential work of English Romantic poetry that offers a profound exploration of the complex relationship between the individual and the natural world. Through an eco-critical analysis of the poem, this research paper has demonstrated how Coleridge’s portrayal of the natural phenomena of El Niño and La Niña serves as a metaphor for nature’s retribution against human exploitation and disregard.

The symbolic significance of the albatross and the polar spirits, as representations of the delicate balance between humanity and the natural world, underscores the poem’s central message: that the disruption of this balance will inevitably lead to dire consequences. Coleridge’s work serves as a prescient warning about the dangers of human hubris and the need for a more harmonious coexistence with nature, a message that remains highly relevant in the context of contemporary environmental challenges.

By engaging with the eco-critical themes in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” we can gain valuable insights into the complex and interdependent relationship between humanity and the natural world, and the urgent need to foster a more sustainable and respectful approach to our interactions with the environment.

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