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The Mariner's Morals In His Tale

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The moral announced at the end of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is supported throughout the poem in the contrast between the grim tale of the Mariner and the wedding scene in which it is presented, despite their apparent inconsistencies.

Even at face value, the Mariner's moral – told after every tale he imparts on unsuspecting souls – provides a reasonable basis for the explanation of components of the ceremonial setting in which it is given.

The last stanza of the poem describes the wedding-guest's reaction to the Mariner's tale as stunned, and claims that the wedding-guest had woken up the next day a sadder and wiser man, "He went like one that hath been stunned, And is of sense forlorn: A sadder and a wiser man, He rose the morrow morn." (23 Coleridge).

The connection between the wedding itself and the poem's moral doesn't stop at the wedding-guest; reasons for revealing the Mariner's moral in the wedding setting can be found in the similarities between the two and the mutual support that results from those similarities.

On the element of religion, it is clear that the moral has a religious backbone, "He prayeth best, who loveth best..." (22 Coleridge).

On the element of love, it is clear that the moral's reward is contingent on finding a genuine love for everything that God created – or at the least, all things on planet Earth.

On the element of good virtue, it is a direct consequence of following the guidance given in a moral that one develops good moral fiber.

These aforementioned parallels provide insight into the purpose of framing the Mariner's tale in a wedding, in that it is similar to framing the Mariner's tale in a common occurring manifestation of the moral itself.

One additional point in question pertains to the motivation of the actions of the crew members, including the Mariner, within his tale.

The death of the albatross is peculiar to the moral of the story in that (from a first-person's point of view) there seems to be no motive in the Mariner's actions, though it should be noted that, in the context of the moral, the Mariner is in direct conflict with loving " All things both great and small" (22 Coleridge).

It is during the passage in Part IV of the poem that both the Mariner's true curse emerges.

In the same passage, the Mariner also redeems himself by seeing the beauty in the world, slimy sea-snakes included, and inadvertently gains the ability to pray again in blessing the snakes.

Throughout the Mariner's tale, the unfortunate sea-snake is taken as a slimy, disgusting, worthless creature that pesters the Mariner by existing, but it is this tiniest of creature that provides the Mariner with the spark that sets him free of his deepest curse: the inability to pray.

Despite the radical difference in tones, occurrences, and mindsets between the Mariner's tale and the wedding in which it is framed, the Mariner's moral found at the end of the poem is supported throughout the entire piece by parallels and contrasting evidence to be taken as the converse of the moral.

The moral announced at the end of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is supported throughout the poem in the contrast between the grim tale of the Mariner and the wedding scene in which it is presented, despite their apparent inconsistencies. In order to support the moral of the poem, in contrast with the Mariner's tale, the wedding scene can be taken as a parallel to the moral of the story. This analogy relating the wedding scene to the moral is formed on a basis of several components of the story, including the forlorn wedding-guest and the essential elements of the wedding. Many events in the Mariner's tale seem to occur without reason, like the death of the albatross, or simply don't stay true to the moral of the poem, like the Mariner's ineffective prayer. These contrasting occurrences between the poem's frame and Mariner's tale reveal a sort of inverted support, or evidence through contradiction, that the tale provides for the poem's moral.

Even at face value, the Mariner's moral – told after every tale he imparts on unsuspecting souls – provides a reasonable basis for the explanation of components of the ceremonial setting in which it is given. The pieces that are best examined through a comparison to the moral can all be associated with love, which seems to be a driving force in the Mariner's words, "He prayeth best, who loveth best All things both great and small; For the dear God who loveth us, he made and loveth all." (22-23 Coleridge). In particular, the moral perhaps provides reason for the wedding-guest's sorrow and wisdom, and the role of the wedding frame to the Mariner's tale.

The last stanza of the poem describes the wedding-guest's reaction to the Mariner's tale as stunned, and claims that the wedding-guest had woken up the next day a sadder and wiser man, "He went like one that hath been stunned, And is of sense forlorn: A sadder and a wiser man, He rose the morrow morn." (23 Coleridge). It is clear that the wedding-guest's sorrow is a direct effect of the Mariner's tale, as the poem doesn't provide any other *logical*

reasoning for it. Perhaps the wedding-guest could have been distressed by his distraction from the wedding, but that seems unreasonable given the context of the guest's sorrow. Rather, I argue that the wedding-guest's sorrow stems from his compassion for the Mariner and the empathy that he feels for him, now that he has learned and embodies the Mariner's moral. To love all things is to feel unconditionally connected to them, and so the life in death that the Mariner must endure is likewise endured by the wedding-guest. The question of whether or not the wedding-guest has actually learned the Mariner's moral is supported in the same line that describes his sorrow, "A sadder and wiser man..."(23 Coleridge), where his newfound wisdom is one in the same as the Mariner's moral.

The connection between the wedding itself and the poem's moral doesn't stop at the wedding-guest; reasons for revealing the Mariner's moral in the wedding setting can be found in the similarities between the two and the mutual support that results from those similarities. In examining some of the inherent properties of a wedding, more specifically, elements of religion, love, and good virtue, parallels can be drawn between the Mariner's moral and the wedding as a setting.

On the element of religion, it is clear that the moral has a religious backbone, "He prayeth best, who loveth best..." (22 Coleridge). Re-written in a more modern style, the moral reads, "Who loves best all things both great and small shall pray best as well.", or something to that effect. In this form, the moral provides its observer with something to gain, provided that the observer follows its guidance. In this sense, the Mariner's moral rewards its observers in effective prayer. The weddings of 1797, when the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" was written, were undoubtedly deeply entwined with the state, church, and consequently prayer. More telling of the connections in the element of religion is the context of prayer in marriage. Arguably, marriage is yet another example of deep love rewarded with effective prayer in the form of holy

matrimony. That is to say, the prayer said at religious weddings is effective in so far as the wedded pair remain together for the rest of their lives.

On the element of love, it is clear that the moral's reward is contingent on finding a genuine love for everything that God created – or at the least, all things on planet Earth. The parallel of the Mariner's moral's conditional in the context of a wedding is quite apparent. Holy matrimony is [ideally] likewise contingent on the discovery of genuine love between two beings. Although the scope of the wedding's parallel to the moral's original condition, to love "All things both great and small", is significantly narrower

On the element of good virtue, it is a direct consequence of following the guidance given in a moral that one develops good moral fiber. Similarly, in marriage, staying faithful to one's partner will sustain a healthy relationship between the two entities in union. From society's point of view, a healthy relationship is attributed with the delicate balance of both partners maintaining good virtue – a feat that is not to be taken lightly. With good virtue comes happiness and prosperity, which are arguably also elements of both the wedding scene and the moral in hand.

These aforementioned parallels provide insight into the purpose of framing the Mariner's tale in a wedding, in that it is similar to framing the Mariner's tale in a common occurring manifestation of the moral itself. It can be difficult to compare or contrast the essence of a tale to the essence of a moral without solid, textual evidence from both sources. As the moral is quite short (its entirety has already been quoted), there is not much more textual evidence that can be provided. Though, given that the wedding scene very much so parallels the moral, the wedding scene can be used as a substitute for the moral itself. With a reason for the use of a wedding as a frame for the Mariner's tale, analysis of the contrast between the two becomes more meaningful - it provides a way to determine whether or not the tale stays true to

the moral throughout its entirety. Some points of interest, where the tale seems to diverge from the moral, include the death of the albatross, his distaste for the slimy creatures, and his lack of ability to pray while cursed at sea. In the examples listed above, the Mariner acts contrary to the moral's suggestions, and in doing so provides evidence for the converse of the moral.

One additional point in question pertains to the motivation of the actions of the crew members, including the Mariner, within his tale. The answer to this question is essential to our analysis, as it puts the crew member's actions into a different light, one of reality or one of the Mariner's motivation. The significance of the difference in 'light' is the difference between a story that has undergone subtle evolution over the ages – some hyperbole here, some understatement there – and a story straight-told as if it had happened in that instant. It is apparent that the Mariner's tale need be taken with a grain (or perhaps a mole) of salt, as demonstrated by the inferred dependence of their surroundings on their actions and the vivid description of their surroundings, let alone the plethora of supernatural events that occur as if they took place in everyday life. Granted, the supernatural in the Mariner's story could be accounted for by presuming that the horrid conditions had caused the Mariner and his fellow crew to hallucinate the entire ordeal. Though, arguably, even if the supernatural is attributed to the Mariner's hallucinations, the resulting tale is still a story crafted and modified by the Mariner. Thus, it still has the same effect on our analysis, which is to say that the Mariner has modified his story, and so the arguments to come may rely on this.

The death of the albatross is peculiar to the moral of the story in that (from a first-person's point of view) there seems to be no motive in the Mariner's actions, though it should be noted that, in the context of the moral, the Mariner is in direct conflict with loving " All things both great and small" (22 Coleridge). For such a turning scene in the poem, the death of the albatross is incredibly brief. In his brevity, Coleridge may have been

attempting to depict the speed at which the thin film protecting all life from death is disintegrated, as well as the impact that the Mariner felt as the impulse of death, had struck. Despite the lack of description on the albatross' death, the bird is compared to a (presumably human) Christian soul and subsequently shown to be a pious omen, as it regularly attended the crew's evening prayer services, “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. … In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud, It perched for vespers nine;” (7 Coleridge). The vespers that the albatross attends are of importance, as the service begins with the Opening Versicles, “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit…” (wikipedia). It was likely that, during these vespers, the ship was turned around – back up north – by the “good south wind [that] sprung up behind” (7 Coleridge). It is also at this point, after the nine vespers visited by the albatross, that the Mariner decided to exert his Christian, human dominance over the 'pious bird of good omen' and shoots it with a *cross*-bow. Here, the Mariner uses a Christian symbol to display human dominance over animals, which deeply rejects the moral of the story. However, the Mariner's act still supports the moral of the story by providing evidence through contradiction, as he will be punished indefinitely for his actions.

It is during the passage in Part IV of the poem that both the Mariner's true curse emerges. Here, after the ship's encounter with the dice-wielding Death and Life-in-Death themselves, the Mariner finds himself stranded on a cursed vessel with an undead crew, floating on a barren landscape of water with no God to answer his prayers. Although the sight of his fellow crewmen dead does pain him, it is his lack of ability to pray that destroys his hope and his heart, “The many men, so beautiful! And they all dead did lie: And a thousand thousand slimy things Lived on; and so did I. I looked upon the rotting sea, and drew my eyes away, I looked upon the rotting desk, and there the dead men lay. I looked to heaven, and tried to pray; But or

ever a prayer had gushed, A wicked whisper came, and made My heart as dry as dust." (12 Coleridge). It should be noted here that the Mariner is still under the impression that man should live on over animals, as he looks on at the sea snakes and despises the life still within them, "He despiseth the creatures of the calm." (12 Coleridge). Here, again, he his receiving punishment for not understanding the equality that God has established between all creatures, large and small, as stated in the moral.

Throughout the Mariner's tale, the unfortunate sea-snake is taken as a slimy, disgusting, worthless creature that pesters the Mariner by existing, but it is this tiniest of creature that provides the Mariner with the spark that sets him free of his deepest curse: the inability to pray. In Part IV of the poem, the Mariner redeems himself by seeing the beauty in the world, slimy sea-snakes included, and inadvertently gains the ability to pray again in blessing the snakes. With every bone in his body, the Mariner repeatedly wishes the snakes dead rather than his crew, despite their innocence. Now, defeated by the stares of dead men cursed and left to live on with no end in sight, the Mariner does the only thing that he can do as a human being: he connects with his surroundings. He finds no comfort in the inanimate objects that occupy the heavens, nor their reflections in the vast, lifeless ocean beneath him. Rather, he finds comfort in the life that is the sea-snake, and goes on to be entranced by their majesty. In a way, he absorbs their liveliness just by observing, then understanding them. With his newfound love for all things, large and small, the Mariner has a sort of epiphany that changes his outlook on the world surrounding him. This epiphany is his newfound moral, and is the moral that he recites towards the end of the poem.

Despite the radical difference in tones, occurrences, and mindsets between the Mariner's tale and the wedding in which it is framed, the Mariner's moral found at the end of the poem is supported throughout the entire piece by parallels and contrasting evidence

to be taken as the converse of the moral. The wedding setting that is set up at the beginning and end of the poem is used as a parallel for the Mariner's moral, and strengthens its message by providing a physical manifestation of the moral that the reader can relate to. Additionally, the wedding scene provides the reader with insight as to how this moral plays a role in everyday life by supporting the moral with a common example. In comparing the Mariner's tale to its moral-in-wedding frame, one discovers that the tale generally supports its moral, despite providing examples of actions, such as the intentional death of the albatross, that seem to diverge from the Mariner's message. Rather, these actions provide converse evidence that only further supports the moral in question. As a whole, the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" has a powerful message that can certainly improve the impact that human beings have on the world - regardless of whether or not its promise of effective prayer are true or not - that is supported by the poem in its entirety.