

Gothic Elements in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by S.T. Coleridge

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Abstract - This paper attempts to examine the Gothic elements present in the setting and theme of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", a poem written by S. T. Coleridge and published in 1798. In the poem, Coleridge utilizes certain effects, such as supernatural events entailing death, decay, and mystery, which all allude to the Gothic tradition. Some have associated Coleridge's writings with "Gothic Romanticism," and his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" may be said to fall under this category. Gothic fiction includes stories characterized by an atmosphere of fear and the occurrence of strange events. From the setting, which is set in an unusual and strange environment, to the style of narration, which is a story within a story narrated by a mariner to a wedding guest, numerous elements of Gothic fiction can be pointed out in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

Keywords: Gothic, Mariner, Death, Albatross, Supernatural

Introduction

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and is included in the poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads*, which was written along with William Wordsworth in 1798. The poem is considered a masterpiece of Romantic literature and features supernatural events that entailed elements evoking the Gothic tradition. The plot of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" revolves around a mariner who stops a wedding guest and proceeds to tell him about his encounters with the sea in "the land of mist and snow" (Coleridge 134). The mariner recalls how he, along with some men on a ship, came across an albatross who initially showed them the way and was considered a good omen. Through the fog and ice, the albatross followed them. But, for whatever reasons, the old mariner killed the albatross with a crossbow and a terrible curse lured upon them after that. The wind stopped, the ship ceased sailing, and there was no drinkable water for them. The mariner's shipmates blamed him for bringing bad luck, so they hung the dead albatross on his neck as a form of reparation. Then they came across a ghost ship that sailed without oars or men. On board were Death and Life-in-Death, who gambled with the lives of the mariner and his fellowmen. All two hundred men on the ship, except the mariner, died. The old man became all alone and was cursed for seven days. He wished to be dead along with the sea creatures, but they lived on, and so did he. The mariner then prayed for the creatures and blessed them. After that, the spell began to break, and the albatross fell from his neck. Finally, a boat piloted by a hermit and his son came sailing towards him as he sighted his home. Then the hermit absolved the mariner of his sins. Now, the mariner is bound to tell his tale wherever he goes—that we must love all things created by God. The wedding guest, on the other hand, leaves "a sadder and a wiser man" (Coleridge 624).

Gothic Setting

Dinah Birch, in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature (7th ed.)*, mentions that gothic fiction is "a mode of narrative fiction dealing with supernatural or horrifying events and generally possessed of a claustrophobic air of oppression or evil" (Birch 290). According to Irana Rata:

Gothic relies heavily on atmosphere and settings to incite in the reader uncanny and sublime feelings. The obscure, dangerous, and breathtaking landscapes relate to Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime. The Gothic relies on old, bleak, remote, vast, or unfamiliar settings as well. (Rata)

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a number of supernatural and horrifying events are present, which makes it suitable to be deemed "gothic fiction". Firstly, Coleridge describes the strange environment of the place where the ship set sail. He said that the ice "cracked and growled, and roared and howled, like noises in a swoon" (Coleridge 61, 62). Further, the water is "still and charmed" and is "awful red" (Coleridge 270, 271). All this setting captures the elements of Gothic tradition.

Picture of Death and Decay

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her book *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, stated that the main plot in gothic fiction includes "priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states" (Eve 9). In many sections of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, there is a picture of death and decay. In Part III of the poem, "four times fifty living men" died and "dropped down one by one" after Death and Life-in-Death gambled on the mariner and his crewmates (Coleridge 216, 219). Many times, Gothic tradition employs death within the context of mystery. The mariner, who survived all by himself and suffered a curse for seven days, portrays a grotesque image. Also, the element of fear is highlighted several times in the poem. The mariner's physical appearance and story scared the wedding guest so much that he said, "I fear thee and thy glittering eye, and thy skinny hand, so brown." (Coleridge 228, 229). The poem is also followed by strangeness, such as the mariner suffering a strange form of penance due to his killing of the albatross.

A Strange Dream

Many scholars argue that the gothic use of dreams lends itself to the suitability of applying symbiotic analysis to Gothic literature in general (Day 181; McAndrew 1). Ronald Thomas, in his online article *Recovering Nightmares: Nineteenth-Century Gothic*, mentions that "the gothic use of dreams may be more properly understood as expressing the uneasy tension in the period between scientific and religious explanations of dream experience" (Thomas). It is believed that through the extensive use of premonitory dreams, there is an inducement of horror. By invoking dream-like states in the characters, the authors are able to create a more direct feeling of terror. Similarly, Coleridge, in his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," uses the element of dream, which is of Gothic tradition. In Part V of the poem, the mariner mentions that he slept during the horrific event, "Oh sleep! It is a gentle thing, beloved from pole to pole" (Coleridge 292, 293). Also, that he had a dream, "I dreamt that they were filled with dew; and when I awoke, it rained (Coleridge 299, 300). There is strangeness surrounding his dream, which echoes that of a typical Gothic tradition. The mariner, in his dream, finds his dead crewmates rising, "It had been strange, even in a dream, to have seen those dead men rise" (Coleridge 333, 334). It is also important to note that parts of his dream came true. After he woke up, rain poured exactly as he saw it in his dream, "The rain poured down from one black cloud" (Coleridge 320). Hence, the dream element also contributes to the mystery of the poem.

Story Within a Story

Eve Kosofsky mentions the Gothic form as "likely to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales" (Eve 9). The Gothic in this sense works effectively in narratives that portray the intersection of the past with the present (Snodgrass, 159). Ronald Thomas compares in the following way: "Frankenstein is a story about story-telling, as its dependence upon and allusions to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' attest" (Thomas). "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is basically a story within a story. The Mariner's encounter with the Wedding-Guest serves as a frame for the Mariner's own story—the story of a sailing voyage the Mariner took long ago. From the beginning of the poem, the Mariner stops a person i.e the Wedding Guest "And he stoppeth one of three", to tell his tale "The wedding guest stood still, and listens like a three years' child" (Coleridge 2, 14, 15). Also, there is a discontinuity in his story-telling. For instance, the Mariner's story is interrupted by the Wedding-Guest in the beginning of Part V, "I fear thee, ancient Mariner! Be calm, thou Wedding-Guest!" (Coleridge 345, 346).

Irina Rata, in *An Overview of Gothic Fiction*, states that "the plot in Gothic fiction is formulaic, and usually moves forward through conventions, such as: omens, oracles, prophecies, visions or dreams" (Rata). In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", the Mariner and his crewmates encountered an albatross who initially served as a good omen for them, "As if it had been a Christian soul, we hailed it in God's name" (Coleridge 64–66). Also, we find this seemingly good omen turned into a curse when the Mariner shot the Albatross with a crossbow:

And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow. (Coleridge 92-94)

We see that the change of events or the curse occurred after this "hellish" act of killing the albatross by the Mariner. One may say that the killing of the albatross is the hamartia of the Mariner and serves as the climax of the poem.

It can be rightly said that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" contains numerous Gothic elements in its theme and setting. As already pointed out, the strange environment of the events that took place, the presence of a picture of death and decay, the Mariner's strange dream, the poem being a story within a story, curses and omens, etc all allude to the Gothic tradition.

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