

**“Role of Supernatural Elements in Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner”**

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**Submitted By**

**Mr. Jigar R. Naiya**

Assistant Prof.

Haji D. V. Aghariya

Jafari Arts & Commerce College,

Sedrana Square - Sidhpur

E-mail: [d.prof.devil@gmail.com](mailto:d.prof.devil@gmail.com)

Mo.: +91 7874213559

## Abstract

Certain phenomena which cannot be explained by the laws of nature have been attributed to supernatural powers and influences. If these happenings led to the happiness of man, they are called benevolent powers, but if they result in suffering or misery they are described as evil spirits. English literature has been enriched by stories in which the supernatural elements play a very vital role. Even the civilized people have desire of hearing miraculous adventures and the stories of ghost and witchcraft. The folktales of all ages and of all countries abound in tales of magic, fairies, spirits, ghosts and demons. Therefore the researcher will try to find out the role played by the supernatural elements in Coleridge's poem "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner".

Key Words: benevolent, supernatural, miraculous, witchcraft, folktales

Coleridge had been a neighbor, friend and collaborator of Wordsworth and their partnership remained fruitful for the growth of English literature. Their publication of "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" heralded the birth of Romanticism. Coleridge along with Wordsworth, liberated 18<sup>th</sup> century's poetry from the strict shackles and put along the road to new freedom and achievement. Compared to Wordsworth, Coleridge was subtle and comprehensive, more gifted with poetic sensibilities, but he was indolent and dreamy and liked to lay on the floating lotus like Lord Vishnu and wake up a while only to sleep again for ages.

Coleridge's "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" has been founded on a dream of his friend Cruickshank, who fancied, he has been a skeleton ship with figures in it. It was Wordsworth, who suggested Coleridge the killing of the Albatross, the revenge of spirits and the stillness of the ship and consequently his sailors dying of thirst. Coleridge blended natural with supernatural and gave a romantic touch to his poetry.

"What is the supernatural?" Through the ages this phenomenon cannot be explained by the known laws of nature. If these supernatural elements lead to the happiness of man they are considered being benevolent, but if they cause suffering and misery they are called evil spirits. Literature has continuously been enriched by stories in which the supernatural plays a vital role. The men's interest in the supernaturalism has continued from primitive ancestors to even civilized man. The folklores of all ages and countries are soaked with the tales of magic, fairies, spirits, ghosts and demons.

The supernatural machinery in “The Rime of The Ancient Mariner” is not merely a series of interesting and often singular details. It works as a controlling imaginative design. The shooting of the Albatross sets the forces of the invisible world in motion. There are number of impossible, incredible and fantastic situation in the poem. The fascinating power in the Mariner’s gaze, the sudden appearance of mysterious skeleton ship, the spectre woman and her mate, coming back of the life to the dead crew, the sudden shrinking of the ship, the polar spirits talking to each other- all these and other supernatural elements, the poet has artistically interwoven in convincing picture of nature like the sun shining brightly at outset, the mist and snow surrounding the ship, the freezing cold of the Arctic region, slimy creatures creeping upon the sea, the moon going up in the sky with a star or two, the water snakes moving in the water with bright colors. The natural and supernatural, the real and fantastic, the possible and impossible have been so skillfully and artistically mingled that the whole poem strikes us as convincing and credible. The setting of the poem is natural, known to all. Coleridge has given the story an air of plausibility with vivid descriptions of nature.

The first supernatural element in the poem is the polar sprit that follows the ship from the land of mist and snow in order to avenge the killing of Albatross. The polar spirit has made the ship still.

“And some in dreams assured were

Of the spirit that plagued us so;

Nine fathom deep he had followed us

From the land of mist and snow.”<sup>1</sup>(131 to 134)

Then comes the appearance from nowhere of the skeleton ship, carrying Death and Life- In- Death being engaged in gambling contest. This ship sails on the sea without wind or tide and it disappears as suddenly as it appeared. The manner of the death of all the sailors excepting the Mariner is supernatural. As each man drops down dead, his soul passes by the old sailor like the whiz of cross bow. It is a strange mystery that while all other sailors die, the Ancient Mariner lives on. There is something supernatural about the way in which the dead body of the albatross automatically falls down from the neck of Mariner in to the sea. The moving of the ship on the sea without a wind is also supernatural. The ship is driven by the Polar Spirit. Even the coming back to life of the dead crew is also a supernatural situation. The dead give a groan, they stir and then all get up. Even more is a troop of Angelic Spirits that enter the bodies. It is to be noted that the bodies of the dead crew do not route is also another mysterious element. The two voices talking to each others are also supernatural powers. They relate to each

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<sup>1</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Poems*. No. 80. Houghton, Mifflin, 1895.

other the long and heavy penance of the Old Mariner. The Angelic Spirit's coming out of the dead bodies and appearing in their own forms of light is another worldly touch.

“Each Corpse lay flat, lifeless and flat,  
 And, by the holy rood!  
 A man all light, a seraph-man,  
 On every Corse there stood.”<sup>2</sup> (488 to 491)

At the end the sudden shrinking of the ship into the sea is also a supernatural episode. The loud and terrible sound reaches the ship and

“The ship went down like lead.” (549)

Coleridge's supernaturalism is often mingled with naturalism. He arranges natural things in such a clever manner as to achieve something supernatural. Prof. Otto and Huxley call this type of supernatural as the super sensible, something that is not within our everyday experience, but is still within the range of possibility. The art of Coleridge lies in the process of accumulation. He puts extraordinary manner as to achieve a grand, super sensible result. Coleridge brings a few supernatural touches which are supersensible. Coleridge creates a strange mixture of the sensible, the supersensible and supernatural; therefore, his supernaturalism is more convincing and credible than the crude horrifying stories of other supernatural writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a Mariner's ship goes from England to Southern Pacific, from the familiar to unfamiliar, the change is effected with remarkable subtlety;

“The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
 The furrow followed free;  
 We were the first that ever burst  
 Into that silent sea.”<sup>3</sup> (103 to 106)

Some times, Coleridge does not describe unpleasant details but he simply suggests. Thus he appeals to our imagination rather than to the senses. In “Ancient Mariner” when the skeleton ship approaches to the sailors the verse full of details occurs in the original text which is afterward

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<sup>2</sup> Gose, Elliott B. "Coleridge and the Luminous Gloom: An Analysis of the "Symbolical Language" in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"" *PMLA* 75.3 (1960): 238-44. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Poems*. G. Bell & sons, 1888.

omitted. Perhaps Coleridge believes that these terrible incidents of the gruesomeness do not add to the suggestiveness of the creation. Even the description of the Mariner having a skinny hand and glittering eyes have a suggestive meaning. The wedding Guest is hypnotized by the Mariner. Thus, he keeps his supernatural to a suggestive level.

Among the English poets Coleridge stands out supreme to conjure a weird wherever necessary in the poem. In spite of many improbabilities in the poem we are compelled to believe the things because, we are fascinated and gripped by his strangeness and air of mystery. He has succeeded in the task of imparting to the supernatural an air of naturalness and realism. When we read the poem we are not conscious at all that there is a piling up of mysterious and improbable details.

Supernaturalism in Coleridge is not only the presentation of sorrow by external devices but also its effect on human conduct and behavior. It is an exploration of what Walter Pater calls, "soul love" the deepest emotions of the soul are explored by the experience of the supernatural. The incidents and emotions arising from them are so full of human interest that they acquire dramatic truth and produce a suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic truth. Mariner's emotions in "The Ancient Mariner" are expressed with an air of reality. It is remarkable that super natural in Coleridge appeared not objectively but psychologically too. Reality does not consist merely in the external appearance of the things perceptible to the senses, but also in the deeper passions and experiences of the soul. The supernatural experiences of the Mariner becomes as real as he was sailing in the ship or his meeting with the guests. The dreams grace in the presentation of the marvelous supernatural which makes Coleridge's work remarkable. By presenting ghostly figure in "The Ancient Mariner" he brings home to us inmost sense his invasions daring as they are, he knows with his psychological insight that the mysterious world of the supernatural must remain a mystery and that subtle suggestion only can produce this sense of mystery. Thus with the delicate touches of suggestions he combines his psychological insight and brings out all the shadowy mystery of the unseen world. The art with which Coleridge excites supernatural wonder and curiosity produces atmosphere of what Aristotle calls "The higher illusion of reality." When the Mariner recovers from his spell and returns to his natural self, a natural human interest emerges in the following lines

"O Wedding-Guest! This soul hath been

Alone on a wide wide sea:

So lonely 'twas' that God himself

Scare seemed there to be.”<sup>4</sup>(597 to 600)

“O sweeter than the marriage-feast,  
 ‘Tis sweeter far to me,  
 To walk together to the Kirk  
 With a goodly company!”<sup>5</sup> (601 to 604)

And in a humanized mood he states the simple more of the poem in the following 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.”<sup>6</sup> (614 to 617)

In “The Ancient Mariner” Coleridge has excluded the conventional crude presentation of supernatural elements. His depiction of supernatural is suggestive and tantalizingly indeterminate giving the effect of vague mystery. There are no horrifying details in the description of the Night-mare Life- In- Death,

“Her lips were red, her looks were free  
 Her locks were yellow as gold:  
 Her skin was as white as leprosy,  
 The Night-mare Life-In- Death was she,  
 Who thicks man’s blood with cold.”<sup>7</sup> (190 to 194)

<sup>4</sup> Dyck, Sarah. "Perspective in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 13.4 (1973): 591-604. Web.

<sup>5</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. Bruce Hamilton Special School, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, Frances. "COLERIDGE AND THE DELUDED READER: "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER"" *The Georgia Review* 31.3 (1977): 617-35. Web.

In fact Coleridge has not given the full description of Life-In-Death but red lips on a skin as white as leprosy and yellow locks are suggestive enough for us to imagine the fearfulness of Life-In-Death and then the poet relates its effect on his mind.

“Fear at my heart, as at a cup,  
My life-blood seemed to sip!”<sup>8</sup>(204 to 205)

We find the dread fullness of Life-In-Death on the mind of the Ancient Mariner at the end of part three, two hundred sailors start dying one by one cursing the Mariner with their eyes.

“One after one, by the star- dogged Moon,  
Too quick for groan or sigh,  
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,  
And cursed me with his eye.”<sup>9</sup> (212 to 215)

Here again the poet instead of giving any ugly details leaves the entire scene to our imagination. It is for us to imagine how the Mariner would have felt when his sailors began dying one by one as the poet says,

“Four times fifty living men  
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan),  
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,  
They dropped down one by one.”<sup>10</sup>(216 to 219)

Here we can not only imagine the scene fully, but also share the wedding Guest’s fear that the Mariner himself is perhaps a ghost. Towards the end of the poem the poet suggests how horrible the Mariner’s face appears. Instead of describing the features of his face, he simply describes the effects produced by the sight of it’s, upon the minds of the pilot, Hermit and the pilot’s boy.

“I moved my lips—the pilot shrieked  
And fell down in a fit;  
The holy Hermit raised his eyes,

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<sup>7</sup> Goodwin, Sarah Webster. "Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Frankenstein." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.1 (1991): 93-108. Web.

<sup>8</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Sterling, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Maiden, Iron. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." *musical recording*, on *Powerslave* (1984).

<sup>10</sup> McElderry, B. R. "Coleridge's Revision of "The Ancient Mariner"" *Studies in Philology* 29.1 (1932): 68-94. Web.

And prayed where he did sit.  
 I took the oars; the pilot's boy,  
 Who now doth crazy go,  
 Laughed loud and long, and all the While  
 His eyes went to and fro."<sup>11</sup> (560 to 567)

Coleridge's method of suggesting supernatural horror is quite different from the practice of the novelist of the horror school like Horace, Walpole and Monk Lewis. Coleridge never introduces ghost in order to create horrifying effect, instead he animates the bodies of the dead crew with a troop of spirits blest and avoids all gruesome details. As Coleridge says,

"They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,  
 Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;  
 It had been strange, even in a dream,  
 To have seen those dead men rise."<sup>12</sup> (331 to 334)

Coleridge has added dream like quality to supernaturals in order to make his poem convincing. C.M. Bowra in his book "The Romantic Imagination" says,

*"He uses the atmosphere of dreams to accustom us to his special world than he proceeds to create freely within his chosen limits."*

In dreams we have an experience at a time in a very concentrated form as our critical self is not at work, the effect is more powerful and more haunting than most effect when we are awake. In "The Ancient Mariner" there are many qualities of a dream. The scenes of the poem move abruptly having dominating effect on our mind. Its visual impressions are very absorbing. Its emotional impacts change rapidly, but comes with an unusual force and when it is all over it clings to our memory.

Coleridge has artistically fused weird atmosphere to his poem "The Ancient Mariner". Among the English poets, Coleridge stands out supreme to conjure up weird atmosphere where ever

<sup>11</sup> GROW, L. M. "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER": MULTIPLE VEILS OF ILLUSION." *Notre Dame English Journal* 9.1 (1973): 23-30. Web

<sup>12</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The poetical works of ST Coleridge*. Vol. 2. W. Pickering, 1835.



necessary. In spite of improbabilities in the poem, we feel its strangeness and an air of mystery. Coleridge has imparted to the supernatural an air of naturalness and realism. When we read the poem we never feel that there is piling up of mysterious and improbable details. Coleridge has never defined any details clearly. The Mariner and the ship are both left unnamed. The seas they sail, the lands they might have proposed to visit are also left unnamed. In spite of all these, the surprising thing is that, it grips by the atmosphere and we never feel conscious of its deficiencies.

Coleridge is a born story teller and he has lavishly employed to conjure up the atmosphere of the chief interest of the poem. The terror and beauty, weird mystery and pleasing romance are skillfully alternated. When the Albatross, the bird of good omen is killed in a wanton feat of curiosity, all nature protest in horror. The tides do not ebb and flow, the wind cease to blow and everything in nature comes to an absolute stand still. The ship is becalmed and lies still like a painted ship on a painted ocean.

Coleridge's introduction of spectre ship and game of dice is played by the Death and Life-In-Death, is perhaps the most mysterious and terrifying thing in the poem. The killing of the sailors with superstitious dread and they think that all the horrors that follow are the punishment of this crime. The supernatural element is further emphasized when we are told that the bird is the favorite of the Polar Spirit, who now wants to avenge its death. The death of the sailors and there mysterious resurrection, the Troop of the Angels filling the air with sweet sounds, the speech of two voices, justice and mercy and a hundred other little details help in proving it's strange and mysterious atmosphere in this poem.

Supernatural elements have been introduced by Walter Scott and William Shakespeare but they have a kind of crudity and coarseness about them but in Coleridge we feel no gruesomeness when we come to the Skeleton Ship, the Polar Spirit, the dead corpses of the ship's crew, Life-In-Death etc.

"The Rime of Ancient Mariner", says Walter Pater "has the plausibility, perfect adaptation to reason and the general aspect of life which belong to the marvelous, when actually presented as a part of a credible experience in our dream. The modern mind, so minutely self scrutinizing, if it is to be effected at all by the sense of the supernatural, needs to be more finely touched than is possible in the older romantic presentment of it. It is this finer, more delicately marvelous supernaturalism, fruit of his own more delicate psychology that Coleridge infuses into romantic

adventure, it also is anew or reviving thing in English literature, and with fines of wearied effect in the” Ancient Mariner” unknown in those older, more simple romantic legends and ballads.

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