



Review paper

Exploring Water as a Catalyst for Fresh Interpretations in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

GD Marina ^a, *TM Jaishrin ^b

^a Department of Sociology, Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

^b Department of State and Municipal Administration, Orenburg State University, Orenburg, Russian Federation

KEYWORDS

Water
Romantic Era
Supernatural
Four realms of Earth
Ethical values

ABSTRACT

During the Romantic Era, a period marked by a shift in thought, Samuel Taylor Coleridge emerged as a pioneering figure, challenging traditional trends and offering a glimmer of hope. In his renowned ballad, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge skillfully explores the transformative power and ethical implications associated with the four realms of the Earth, particularly emphasizing the vital role of water. This study aims to dissect the profound significance of water and its representation in Coleridge's major work, particularly in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." By unraveling the hidden truths obscured by skepticism, we seek to shed light on Coleridge's supernatural techniques and innovative ideas, which employ water as a symbol of salvation. Through this exploration, Coleridge has paved the way for future generations, constructing a new platform for understanding and appreciation.

1. Introduction

Water, one of the four essential elements of the universe alongside fire, soil, and wind, plays a fundamental role in sustaining life. Throughout literature and religion, water has been imbued with symbolic meaning, representing purification and a path to human happiness. It is at the banks of rivers like the Euphrates, Tigris, and Indus that great civilizations, including Mesopotamian and Indus, have flourished. In his literary endeavors, S.T. Coleridge beautifully portrays the significance of water, imparting moral lessons to humanity (Eaton, 1906).

Poets of the Romantic Era exhibit a fascinating amalgamation of characteristics, initially displaying enthusiasm and sensibility while being captivated by imaginative new ideas. Coleridge, among them, captures these elements through his vivid imagination, urging us to embrace cooperation with water and other natural elements. He does not perceive transcendentalism as an adversary to the concept of Transcendentalism, but



*Corresponding author: Asep Aprianto

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/ijisr.23010114>



rather sheds logical light on the subject. Coleridge's major works, including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel" are influenced by the surrounding natural world. Despite being a non-living organism scientifically, water assumes the role of a significant character, lending magnificence and enhancing the panoramic beauty of these works. It represents purification and inspires Coleridge in composing the ballad, weaving concepts related to water and water bodies (Ball, 2001; Christie and Coleridge, 2006).

The objective of this study is to explore the significance of water as one of the four essential elements of the Earth. Water, with its unique ability to cleanse sins, is a central theme in Coleridge's ballad. The study aims to elucidate whether water truly possesses the power to absolve the sins committed by the Ancient Mariner. Coleridge, through his poetry, reveals these profound truths, employing techniques that underscore the role of the common man in accepting responsibility for his actions during the sea voyage (Coleridge et al., 2021). This portrayal contrasts with other elements of the Earth, vividly capturing the essence of nature. Water emerges as a vital character in the narrative, highlighting its significance alongside living beings. This line of thought promises to enrich our understanding as we delve deeper into Coleridge's poetic revolution, which sought to foster greater individual freedom (Collins, 2016).

Supernaturalism, as described by Barkley Smith, is a system that allows for flexibility and diversity in the fundamental principles of knowledge. Before the advent of scientific advancements, people were bound by this framework. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," composed during 1797-98 and included in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, narrates the personal experiences of a sailor who encounters water and faces misfortune upon its surface. The inspiration behind this ballad has sparked various opinions. Some argue that it was influenced by James Cook's Second Voyage of Exploration (1772-1775) to the South Seas and the Pacific Ocean. Others propose that it was influenced by Thomas James' voyage to the Arctic. However, William Wordsworth suggests that the ballad was a result of their company during a walking tour to the Quantock Hills in Somerset. Wordsworth recalls reading Captain George Sherlock's book, "A Voyage Round the World by way of the great scout sea," which reportedly inspired Coleridge to compose this timeless ballad. Fundamentally, the ballad explores themes of salvation and the consequences of violating nature, with the mariner experiencing the side effects of his actions. Similar to other great classics like "Paradise Lost," it serves as a transcendental work, shedding light on the dark aspects of human behavior and imparting moral lessons to humanity (Corbin, 2019).

2. Discussion

The Ballad portrays the sea voyage of the mariner, whose impulsive and wicked actions drastically alter the course of his life and death. As a consequence of his sinful act, he undergoes an internal struggle, eventually coming to comprehend his actions and seek redemption. He learns to let go of his negative beliefs and embraces all of God's creatures, big or small, with an open heart. The sea voyage of the Ancient Mariner becomes a symbolic journey of learning and enlightenment, encompassing feelings of accountability, acceptance, forgiveness, and repentance that extend beyond his own life and provide wisdom to humanity as a whole (Curran, 2010).

The mariner's act is followed by a punishment in the form of a dead Albatross hung around his neck as a constant reminder of the severity of his deed. The bird posed no threat to him or his crew, but rather served as a spiritual guide protecting them during their voyage. The incident, however, brought a curse upon the crew's lives, and being stranded at sea, they had no escape. The mariner, consumed by anger, begins to curse the sea and its creatures, forgetting to appreciate the beauty of God's creations, and pays a heavy price for his actions (Wilson, 1963).

In the next phase, the mariner encounters Death. One by one, his crew members die, leaving him alone and filled with fear. Imprisoned by the sea, surrounded only by water, he spends days and nights in a desolate state. The dreadful surroundings and the haunting eyes of the dead men terrify him. It is in this moment that he finally acknowledges the truth and takes responsibility for his circumstances. This phase is not just a punishment but an opportunity for him to realize and accept the beauty of the universe. For the first time, he appreciates the beauty of the water snake and learns that all of God's creatures should be cherished and loved, with no authority to harm them. This newfound perspective releases him from his invisible chains and becomes a blessing for the water snakes. As the dead albatross falls from his neck into the sea, he comes to understand

the interconnectedness of all creatures and recognizes the mysterious and omnipotent forces that govern his fate (Ferber, 2012).

Coleridge skillfully employs the concept of water, the most abundant form of nature, within "The Rime of Ancient Mariner." Water serves as a symbol of strength and the power of nature, representing both spirituality and the natural world. In its various forms, water conveys its purpose, and the poet uses the image of ice to depict imprisonment and the harsh consequences it brings. The mariner, the central protagonist, exclaims:

*"The ice was all between
The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It crackled and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!" (Coleridge 5)*

These verses emphasize the sense of confinement and imprisonment experienced by the mariner. The repetition of the word "ice" underscores his current state of being trapped (Jackson, 2008).

The narrative of the story fluctuates between the realms of spirituality and the natural world, taking us on a journey through water. Amidst these voyages, the beauty of the surroundings is also highlighted, even in the midst of turmoil (Stevens, 2004). One instance is when the mariner finds himself trapped in a storm, where both "mist and snow" enveloped the scene and an intense coldness prevailed. Despite the freezing conditions, Coleridge's vivid imagination portrays the breathtaking beauty of the surroundings:

*"And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast high came floating by,
As green as emerald." (Coleridge 5)*

In this portrayal, the poet captures the magnificence of the icy landscape, with towering ice masses floating by, exhibiting a stunning emerald green hue.

Through the use of figurative language, Coleridge employs a simile to depict the stunning beauty of the snow, which transforms into a vibrant green resembling an emerald. However, this moment of beauty is juxtaposed with the harsh reality that confronts the mariner. Once again, Coleridge's words convey the power of the scene, presenting a dramatic portrayal of the snowy cliffs and the gloomy yet shining world (Oerlemans, 2004).

Coleridge's depiction of water encompasses both its dreadful and beautiful aspects. It is a force that can bring both regeneration and disaster to the universe. At the peak, we witness the harsh and cold snow, while in its flowing form, water symbolizes fluidity and change. The mariner becomes aware of the contrasting nature of water as he is surrounded by the sea, facing the punishment inflicted by the very entity he had committed a sinful act against, by killing the innocent bird (Schwenk and Wolfman, 1994).

Despite their intense thirst, the mariners find themselves unable to quench it with even a single drop of water. The use of poetic language adds allure to this state of drought. Coleridge deliberately emphasizes the word "water" twice to highlight its presence, yet it remains inaccessible to them due to its salinity. The same water that gave birth to this vibrant planet, nurturing its greenery and adorning the landscape with rainbows, now reveals its adverse side (Fiona, 2013). This transformation is a consequence of the mariner's wrongful actions, and at times, the water becomes hot, radiating blue and white colors. The essential element necessary for life becomes a source of punishment, akin to witch's oil (Sha, 2018). The mariner expresses his state of mind using words like "dread" and "rumbled," conveying his fear and desperate plea for help.

This singular episode in the mariner's life broadens his perspective of the universe, as he becomes aware of the spiritual wonders during his sea voyages and is ready to embrace the joys of nature. At this stage, he recognizes the power of letting go of negative thoughts and frees the spirits of his deceased crew members, who guide him to the Hermit. Although the mariner manages to rid himself of the burden of the albatross around his neck and successfully returns home, he finds that absolution eludes him. Even the polar spirits

acknowledge that forgiveness cannot be obtained easily; it must be earned. The mariner cannot escape the haunting image of the dead albatross, and its blood leaves an indelible imprint on his mind, a lasting reminder of his past actions.

3. Conclusion

The significance of water creatures and the four realms of the universe in our lives is highlighted, emphasizing high moral values. In his *Biographia Literaria* of 1827, S.T. Coleridge expressed his belief that it is not only our duty to love our family and neighbors, but also our responsibility to love the entire universe with equal intensity. The artistic perspective of the mariner emerges, and he becomes determined to unite all beings. The ancient mariner successfully fulfills his mission of teaching humanity about the importance of water in our lives. He skillfully blends reality and fantasy, providing a detailed description of the sea voyage. The ballad is adorned with vivid paintings of the sea and its surroundings, incorporating supernatural elements that captivate readers' interest. Moreover, the ballad reflects the realities of human existence, evoking tender emotions that resonate with the depths of human experience. It is composed during actual sea voyages.

Similar lines of thought can be found in Coleridge's other works, such as *Kubla Khan*, indicating the potential for further exploration of water aspects and their underlying factors in the future. Therefore, it is imperative for the academic community to approach these ideas collectively and seek suitable answers, as Coleridge's literary insights are scattered throughout his works.

Water not only provides an abundant atmosphere but also revitalizes the sense of salvation. It is considered an ecclesiastical element with the capacity to cleanse all sinful deeds. This motif lies at the heart of the ballad, and Coleridge, with his expertise, achieves remarkable success. Thus, he enlightens readers about the pure essence of water, an incarnation of enlightenment in any civilized world.

Funding Information

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Conflict

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- Eaton, A.B. (1906). *Coleridge's The Rime of Ancient Mariner with notes and introduction* (pp. 1–91). Educational Publishing Company.
- Ball, P. (2001). *Life's matrix A biography of water* (pp. 11–417). University of California Press.
- Christie, W., & Coleridge, S. T. (2006). *A literacy life* (pp. 1–272). Macmillan.
- Coleridge, Sen, Mansukhani et al. (2021). *S. T. Coleridge selected poems A critical evaluation* (pp. 1–512). Unique Publishers.
- Collins, William the editor. Samuel Taylor Coleridge the Rime of ancient Mariner and other poems. (2016). *Collins Classics*, 1–158.
- Corbin, C. (2019). *The evangelical party and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's return to the Church of England* (pp. 1–238). Routledge.
- Curran, S. (2010). *The editor. The Cambridge companion to British romanticism* (pp. 10–275). Cambridge University Press.
- Ferber, M. (2012). *The Cambridge introduction to British romantic poetry* (pp. 1–262). Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, H. J. (2008). *the editor. Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The major works including Biographia Literaria*. Oxford University Press.
- Oerlemans, O. (2004). *Romanticism and the materiality of nature* (pp. 15–253). University of Toronto Press.
- Schwenk, T., & Wolfman. (1994). *Water the element of life* (pp. 1–264). Steiner Books.
- Sha, C. R. (2018). *Imagination and science in romanticism* (pp. 1–344). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fiona, S. (2013) *The editor. Wordsworth and Coleridge lyrical ballads 1798 and 1802*. (pp. 1–432). Oxford University Press.

14. Stevens, D. (2004). *Romanticism* (pp. 1–130). Cambridge University Press.
15. Wilson, R. (1963) *the editor. A Coleridge Selection English Classics with introduction and notes.* (pp. 1–200). Nelson Thornes Ltd.

