



## Eternal punishment and human dominion over nature in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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### Abstract

This paper presents that humans' dominion over nature in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is an ecological crime that results in eternal punishment rather than complete redemption. This study examines the Mariner's act of killing the Albatross as an example of anthropogenic violence where nature is being treated as an object to be controlled by human beings rather than treated with respect. Written from an ecological perspective, the paper deals with the disruption of the moral and ecological balance of the poem, due to this act and its suffering that continues throughout the life of the Mariner. Through detailed reading, the study shows how nature in the poem performs as an alternative and has moral weight and power.

The paper argues that the punishment of Mariner in the poem is not temporary, which is easily resolved through repentance, but continues for his whole life. The Mariner must go and move around the world from place to place and continue retelling his story as a punishment. The poem also connects to the ongoing modern-day ecological crisis, such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and exhaustion of natural resources. This study connects Coleridge's ecological perspective with environmental ethics. The paper adds ethical, eco-critical, and narrative elements to enhance eco-critical scholarship. Just as the Mariner's continuous punishment after killing the bird, the paper presents that the after-effects of the environmental violence can never be completely erased.

**Keywords:** Human dominion over nature, eternal punishment, ecological violence, anthropocentrism, and environmental ethics

### Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) is considered one of the most studied and discussed poems of the Romantic period. The poem talks about complex questions such as morality, spirituality, guilt, and nature. For a long time, the poem has been understood as one of the Christian allegorical works of sin and redemption. In fact, it reflects the Mariner's spiritual condition after killing the Albatross. Recently, ecocritics begin to connect Romantic texts in light of green ethics and ecology. When viewed in this way, the poem is not just religious but also a critique of human imperialism on nature. The Romantic era arose at the time of industrial growth and scientific discovery, during which nature was seen more and more as a force that could be controlled and exploited by humans. According to Enlightenment thinking, the natural world stood lower than human beings. This reflects a belief in human mastery and rational control. Writers of Romanticism, on the other hand, put emphasize on emotion, imagination, and sacredness of nature. Coleridge's poem has a reflection of tension between both human authority and ecological balance.

The killing of the Albatross by Mariner seems to have been unexpected and without reason. The animal does not harm or threaten the ship; instead, it takes the ship through the dangerous ice safely. Nevertheless, the Mariner shoots the bird without any necessity or reason. This act has become the main ecological and moral crime in the poem. The suffering that follows suggests that nature is not passive but responsive and capable of reflecting imbalance and punishment.

This paper argues that Coleridge identifies' humans' dominion over nature with ecological violence, which results in eternal punishment. This shows that the Mariner's endless wandering from place to place and retelling of his story represent a permanent responsibility. The paper goes on to compare the poem's ecological violence with a contemporary environmental concern and argues that modern society only replicates what the mariner has done to nature.

### Literature Review

Recent ecocritical studies have suggested new interpretative frameworks for reading *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a work concerned with the human-natural world relationship. According to Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) [2], "the non-human environment is present not just as a thing that frames the action of humanity but as a presence which starts to suggest how human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 7). This point is pertinent to Coleridge's poem because the Albatross, the sea, the wind, and the changes of weather, which are not simply the background, are forces that influence the story and control the fate of the characters. The Albatross, the sea, the wind, and the changing weather play an active role in furthering the plot and fate of the characters. The Mariner's act of killing the Albatross disturbs the balance between mankind and nature, leading to his suffering. Buell's argument makes this study more robust because it contends that nature is significant both morally and narratively. This work seeks to fill this gap, where he elucidates the importance of nature for ecology but

doesn't argue how ecological violations are continuously punished.

Jonathan Bate, in his work *Romantic Ecology* (1991) [3], strengthens the ecological reading of the poem. Bate makes the bold claim that many concerns and issues raised by modern ecocriticism can be found in Romantic poetry, for it emphasized the oneness of human beings with the natural world and thus resisted the humanist and Enlightenment ideal of human mastery over the rest of nature. This perspective helps in positioning Coleridge as an early thinker concerned with environmental ethics. That is to say, in " *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the killing of the Albatross represents an instance of human domination over nature, while the consequences of that action immediately represent the hazards of dislocating the ecological balance. Bate thus supports this study as he elaborates on the ecological awareness of Romantic literature. Nevertheless, Bate primarily focuses on Romantic literature's ecological awareness and does not fully address the concept of eternal punishment. This study, therefore, relies on Bate's insights to read the poem as a text linking ecological imbalance to the idea of guilt, responsibility, and continued suffering.

A contemporary perspective is being provided by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) [4]. Nixon introduces the concept of "slow violence" (Nixon 2), referring to environmental destruction that occurs gradually and whose effects become visible over time. Nixon's concept connects to the contemporary environmental issues, as it has an important bearing on Coleridge's poem: the violence against nature does not produce an immediate effect but only a slow and continuous one, such as drought, thirst, death, and the terrible curse. The consequences of the Mariner's crime do not appear immediately; instead, suffering unfolds gradually through drought, thirst, death, and psychological torment. Therefore, the poem records a single act against nature with lasting, long-term effects that stretch into an undetermined future. Nixon's concept of slow violence helps in explaining how the poem represents delayed and continuous punishment. However, this paper also contributes to Nixon's concept through a literary reading in which the Mariner's perpetual wandering and the narrative he performs can be understood as a form of ecological responsibility. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* thus foreshadows present-day ecological concerns about environmental degradation and the effects of human actions on nature.

### **Human Dominion as Ecological Violence**

The killing of the Albatross is one of the most disturbing moments of the poem because it occurs without any motive, necessity, or reason. The Albatross does not pose any threatening conditions to the crew and the ship; instead, it guides the ship through the dangerous conditions of ice. Coleridge describes the bird's arrival "as if it had been a Christian soul," presenting its innocence and spiritual significance in the poem. Yet the Mariner, all of a sudden, without any thought, kills the Albatross.

From an ecocritical perspective, this is an early hint of anthropocentrism where the world is recognized through a human-centered scope, and humans feel that they have the right to dominate nature. The Mariner treats the Albatross as something that is not important, rather than as a living creature that deserves respect. Since there is no proper reason for the Mariner's act, the killing of the bird shows

how normalized violence against nature has become and reveals the alarming attitude that nature only exists for human use.

Ecocritical theory helps in framing this moment. As Lawrence Buell puts it, environmental crises come from humanism, which separates human beings from the rest of the natural world. The Mariner's behaviour is a perfect example that shows such a separation, as if his authority over the bird (Albatross) does not have to be justified.

This is where Jonathan Bate's concept of *Romantic ecology* is importantly relevant. Bate views Romantic poetry as an attempt to restore the human-nature relationship after industrialization. One act of violence against the natural world in Coleridge's poem creates a series of disastrous consequences. The Mariner goes on wandering around the world from place to place for his crime against nature, which is killing the Albatross, and he has to continue retelling his story as punishment without complete redemption.

The ecological imbalance is felt directly after killing the bird (Albatross), where the wind stops, the ship is becalmed, and the sailors suffer terrible thirst. Nature is somehow out of control. The poem refuses to represent ecological violence as a minor act; instead, it is something that can destabilise the balance of the whole world.

### **Eternal Punishment and Endless Responsibility**

One of the most important things about this poem is that the Mariner's punishment is never-ending. Here, Coleridge separates from the traditional view of a repentant sinner, whose punishment ends with the merciful forgiveness of God, by presenting a continuous, unresolved punishment.

The Mariner survives while the rest of the crew dies, forcing him to live with guilt and memory. He explains, "That agony returns," which forces him to repeat his story whenever the inner suffering reappears. Thus, the poem shows that punishment is not momentary but continuous. In the long run, the Mariner tells his story of memory, guilt, and confession, and in this way, the storytelling becomes an eternal punishment for the Mariner. This can be placed in dialogue with Timothy Morton's argument about ecological guilt. According to Morton, modern ecological destruction constitutes a regime in which humanity cannot completely disconnect itself from the consequences of ecological violence. This can be linked to the Mariner's case, as he cannot disconnect himself from his violent act against nature.

It also has an ecological meaning. The Mariner's punishment is not just about physical, but something that becomes psychological, spiritual, and social. He wanders the earth from place to place without belonging to the ordinary community of human beings. The punishment shows that ecological violence brings long-lasting consequences that follow the initial violent act.

The final moment of the poem reassures this reading. The Mariner has learned a lesson in respect for nature, but this understanding does not save him from eternal suffering. Thus, redemption is not complete in the poem. For Coleridge, punishment is not an act of correction that can be later resolved, but instead, it is an act of continuing responsibility.

### **Contemporary Ecological Degradation and the Poem's Relevance**

The reasonable issues raised in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* continue to resonate in today's modern society, given the present conditions of human-induced destruction through large-scale deforestation, pollution, overconsumption, and industrialization. In this modern day, many ecological crises, such as melting of glaciers, rising sea levels, extinction of animals, and environmental catastrophes, remind us how long-lasting and far-reaching the consequences of human dominion over nature can be. In this respect, the killing of the Albatross in the poem has become symbolic of contemporary acts of ecological violence. Just as the Mariner with his crossbow shot the bird without any obvious reason or motive, many of today's modern industries destroy forests, oceans, and living systems in a similarly mindless and unprovoked way for short-term economic gains. A living system that should be kept in balance and respected is instead seen as a resource to be plundered.

Contemporary criticism, as exemplified by Rob Nixon, refers to this destruction of the environment as "Slow violence," where damage unfolds gradually yet becomes very serious over time, with extremely adverse effects in the long term. In fact, this corresponds to the poem's construction, in which the consequences of the Mariner's act are deferred to a time far into the future, so the initial moment of suffering does not come immediately, but instead it becomes increasingly amplified.

On this level, one could argue that climate change is another way to understand the ecological imbalance that is represented in the poem. Indeed, after the Albatross's killing, all conditions became inimical to life. By analogy, the current ecological crisis may be interpreted as nature reacting to human actions. From this perspective, the heatwaves, droughts, floods, and other extreme weather events seen today are signs of an ecological imbalance brought by human activities.

In this regard, the Mariner's incessant storytelling parallels today's environmental activism. Scientists, environmental writers, and climate activists have had to tell the story about the destruction of the environment again and again, so the Mariner is forced to continue telling his tale again and again to pass on a lesson to others as a symbol of concern. His story becomes at once a confession and a warning

Indeed, connecting the current ecological crisis to Coleridge's poem shows that many present-day concerns were anticipated in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The poem thus strikes a blow at the hubris of mankind's thinking that they have the right and they can exploit nature at will and without consequence. It also works to remind readers that the repercussions of environmental degradation are felt long after the actual event has happened.

### Findings

This study finds that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* presents the moral and spiritual agonies of the Mariner within the framework of ecological violence. The killing of the Albatross stands as a symbol of human domination over nature, informed by anthropocentric fantasies of mastery. Such violence is destructive to both ecological and moral orders.

The second finding is that the poem's notion of punishment is one of continuity rather than a moment of discontinuity. The mariner's punishment is realized in his incessant wandering and his continued retelling of his story. Each of

these forms of punishment constitutes an ethical moment of accounting.

The final finding is that nature in the poem is not a passive background but a responsive force against which the action unfolds. Through changes in the sea and weather, and a supernatural atmosphere. Ecological imbalance is manifested.

Finally, the poem is important in its ecological concerns. The poem emphasizes the respect for nature and treats it as a form of living creature rather than something as an object for exploitation by humans. Many contemporary texts condemn the kind of exploitative, anthropocentric attitude towards nature that Coleridge already critiques. As such, the poem may be read not just as a romantic poem but as an important early ecopoetic text.

### Conclusion

Ecological damage cannot be easily erased or forgotten. The punishment in the poem is meted out through memory, suffering, and narration, turning the Mariner's life into a permanent witness to his crime. Just as the Mariner wanders around the world from place to place and continues retelling his story for the crime against nature. Nature, therefore, constitutes a moral agent that responds to human violence with disorder and disturbance.

With this in mind, the poem becomes even more relevant in light of recent ecological degradation, as many of the current environmental issues also suggest that humankind has often continued to pursue its earlier patterns of ruthless exploitation of nature. Coleridge's poem remains one of the most profound literary articulations of environmental ethics, ecological responsibility, and the consequences of human hubris.

Therefore, the study indicates that, besides the religious and supernatural aspects of the poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is also an early ecocritical text that warns against anthropocentric ecological damage and calls for an attitude of respect, balance, and long-term responsibility towards nature.

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