
Analysis of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as a Vampire Poem

The first thing that needs to be emphasized here is that the Mariner is commonly not considered as a vampire. For centuries he has been considered more a figure of prophetic warning or the Wandering Jew. (USTE VAKVI LIKOVI One of the reasons could be his parallel with the Wandering Jew figure (explain the characteristics of the WJ from Bryan Fulmer and compare them to (some) the vampiric pointed out by Twitchell) The reason why the Mariner has escaped the treatment of a vampiric figure is the fact that the mainstream criticism has generally focused on the sin-penance-redemption theme and the specifically Christian symbolism and moral of the tale, which somehow pervade the storyline. If the Mariner is seen as a Christian soul who undergoes horrible penance after a committed sin, and comes out of it changed with some universal knowledge to impart to his listeners, then nothing evil and diabolical can be attributed to him. Why would he then be presented as a vampire? In fact, he has even suffered more than a mere act of bird-killing should ensue, as animal killing happens quite often in the world and does not comply to the Christian idea of sin nor determine a harsh punishment. The reasons for a different perspective was engendered when I noticed, first, some incongruities in the depiction of the Mariner as a redeemed or half-redeemed benevolent soul; second, there are some moments in the narration that cannot be explained with the traditional "sacramental vision" analysis (as in Warren, 1958: 78); and third, the vampiric ties more tightly within the meaning of the poem in general. My reading of the Mariner is of a kind of proto-vampire figure which has been previously discussed by James Twitchell in "The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature" and before that in his paper "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as Vampire Poem". I am taking these as basic texts and the vampiric characteristics that Twitchell enlists, but continue constructing upon it new meaning and ideas of interpretation with the aim to unravel the reasons why Coleridge's employed the vampire in a story about a violent act committed on sea travel, and what meaning the vampire imposes on the poem.

To start with the basic ideas that connect the poem to the vampiric, they are: the poem involves blood-drinking, there has been a crime committed (one of the main reasons a person turns into a vampire in legends), the character is unable to die, and there is something diabolical at work. As Twitchell points out: "Beliefs in vampires grew simultaneously with Christianity as a way to explain how the devil enters the body of a sinner." (pp. 22-3) In addition to this is the association of the vampires' blood-drinking and communion, where water represents Christ's blood, and also Christ's word's "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at, the last day". If we consider the reverse situation when someone commits a sin or is excommunicated he will be deprived of eternal life after death. Then the devil took control over his body, according to the essence of Christian vampirism and the body is denied the chance of death. But at the same time vampirism defies religion in the way that the vampire is granted eternal life, but not through God's grace, rather than as work of the devil. (Summers, 1928, McNally and Foreescu, 1973). The vampire body can be saved by doing penance, states Calmet in his Dissertations on Angels, Demons, Spirits and Vampires, which Coleridge is thought to have read, and that is exactly what the Mariner goes through.

I argue that the vampiric traits of the Mariner are introduced to work as a *deus ex machina* force to offer a way for the Mariner to pay the penance, enable the character's immortality and

endow him with superhuman characteristics to go from land to land and tell the story in a strange speech.

Before we go into the vampire's imposition on the meaning on the poem, it seems inevitable to start with analysis of the vampiric elements in the text.

Coleridge's *Mariner* is endowed with vampiric characteristics interspersed throughout the poem. The Wedding-Guest often intrudes into the Mariner's story, saying that he believes the old man has been taken over by demons: "God save thee, ancient Mariner! From the fiends, that plague thee thus!" (lines 79-80lines) Why would Coleridge have the Wedding-Guest say this? Could there be another meaning except the literal one that he has been possessed by demons, and aren't vampires' bodies taken over demons according to superstition? The presence of some kind of diabolic power is clear from the beginning of the narrative when the Mariner stops and holds the Wedding-Guest who unwillingly has to hear his tale. The Wedding-Guest is thus prevented to attend the religious ceremony. The evil force is seen at its work against ? religious rite, but there is also prevention of social festivities and normal human life, evident from the depiction of an array of people of different ages, friends, male and female. The evil-tainted Mariner isolates the Wedding-Guest from the other two guests and from the merry ceremony. The Mariner is generally considered to be a passive character (Wordsworth). However, this is the second active action of the Mariner after his murder of the Albatross, which is also an act of evilness. The religious connotations of the Wedding-Guest's marriage ceremony attendance are parallel to the religious associations of the Albatross. It came to the mariners "as if it had been a Christian soul" (lines). However farfetched it may seem, there is a veiled analogue between the act of destruction of the Albatross and what eventually the Mariner will do to the Wedding-Guest. The Mariner is going to isolate him from the community and in addition to becoming a "wiser man", gaining new knowledge, he also becomes a "sadder man". Why would the Wedding-Guest become unhappy if he learns a story of sin, penance and redemption and the benevolent God who loves all creatures equally? It seems that he has acquired some terrible knowledge of evil or the demonic, rather than some truth about progressive forces or a benevolent universe. As the narrative presents it, the Mariner starts to tell his story because he says "... this frame of mine was wrenched/ With a woeful agony" (lines 578-79). There is no evidence of a benevolent motive for this action. Beginning the story, this agony leaves his body, and having told it, he feels revived and renewed as the vampire regains energy when feeding of his victim (Twitchell, 1977, p.34).

The Mariner has a similar effect on the other three male characters he meets on his journey home: The Pilot, the Pilot's Boy, and the Hermit. This episode attributes a different meaning to the tale, making it more than just a story of penance. While the group of three rescuers "cheerily" (line 541) rows towards the sinking ship, the situation changes when the Mariner comes on their boat. The pilot shrieks in terror and falls in a fit, and before the Pilot's boy goes mad he realizes that something is not what it seems: "... I see/ The devil knows how to row" (lines 568-69). If the Mariner is merely a tortured soul, why would he look to the young boy as a devil, and how does this link to a person who has killed a bird? The only person that is not completely affected by the Mariner's presence is the Hermit, but he also suffers a state of isolation. Like the Wedding-Guest who is obliged to hear the old seaman's tale of confession, he is also stirred by the Mariner. If the Mariner is merely a person who underwent horrific experiences on sea and gained some universal knowledge to spread, then there is no reason why two of the people who rescued him would suffer by only looking him in the eyes or face, if there wasn't something evil and diabolic that they recognized within him. This could be his

power to eliminate the two men who identify the evilness in him, so that the Hermit can shrive him. The Mariner's need for confession can be explained by the sin that he committed, the killing of the innocent bird. But, the way his body reacts requires a vampiric reading. His body starts to wrench and feels fits of pain, which is a reaction of the folkloric vampire to the sign of the cross. It is also interesting to notice the Hermit's first reaction to the Mariner as he asks: "What manner of man art thou?" (lines 578), thus questioning his existence as a normal human being. The thing that remains unmentioned is whether the Hermit actually shrives him. The ambiguity of the situation leads to the conclusion that the Mariner does not receive absolution, and contributes to the idea that he remains a vampire. The Mariner goes to his home land as a vampire and continues his eternal journey to different lands to tell his story and suck the energy of his auditors.

The blood-sucking act performed by the Mariner after seeing the ghost ship in the distance is also followed by a similar act of the sailors which resembles blood-drinking, "Gramercy! they for joy did grin, / And all at once their breath drew in./ As they were drinking all" (lines 164-6). This part is certainly one of the most ambiguous and uncanny points in the poem, besides the fact that the poem is actually an example of uncanniness itself. We have a ship in the distance and the Mariner bites his arm to sustain himself in order to speak. And not only do the sailors draw his blood too, but they do it "for joy". This image calls to mind the vampiric thirst and pleasure from drinking blood. At this point both the Mariner and the crew are literally presented as vampires. The symbolism of these acts is that he vampirizes himself, and by drinking his blood, the sailors also become vampires.

Later, when their bodies are possessed by death, they do "not rot nor reek" (256). Just like vampires from folk legends, these walking corpses do not decompose or start to give off an unpleasant smell. It is interesting that the dead bodies are revived to sail the ship only at night, which is a period associated with the actions of vampires in folk tales and legends. The sailor's bodies are also "inspired" as the 1834 Gloss reports. However, the first printing of the Gloss in the 1817 Sibylline Leaves employs the word "inspirited" (Twitchell, 1977, p.12). The corpses of the sailors are not inspired, but possessed by spirits, which is further affirmed in line 341, where they are referred to as a "ghastly crew", meaning that their bodies are controlled by ghosts. Although the same version names these revived bodies "a troop of spirits bless'd" (line 350) and the Gloss explains they were gathered by the "guardian saint"; it is common knowledge that Coleridge revised the first version to mask his original intention of writing a vampire tale. The sailor's ultimate destiny is death, as decided by the dice game, which reaches them when the ship comes back to their native land and sinks. Whereas their vampiric condition on the ship starts from their collective blood-drinking from the Mariner and is intentionally veiled by the author in order not to bring it to the center of the story and create a pure story about vampires, but redirect the general focus of the narrative to the sin, penance and partial redemption theme.

When the Mariner's life is won by the Life-in-Death figure in the dice game, he says that by the sunset his "life blood seem'd to sip" (line 206) from fear. The verb "sip" always refers to a small quantity of liquid. Is the small amount of blood he is left with the result of the blood-sucking action he performed on himself and was followed by two hundred sailors? Or on a metaphorical level, explaining the psychological consequences of the strange meeting, he feels that his life energy has been drained. The Night-in-Death figure acts like a psychological vampire who drains his energy.

As he describes the effects of the sailors' death on him and the sight of the curse in their eyes,

realizing the horror he is provoking in the Wedding-Guest, he consoles him "... I could not die". The phrase can be understood as his inability to die, despite of the action of destructive forces on sea. The verb "could" denotes certain willingness, but the lack of allowance to do or experience something. The sight of two hundred dead sailors initiated in him the wish to die, but unlike them, he wasn't granted death. Whereas, at this point, he is also trying to keep the Wedding-Guest's attention since who wouldn't be scared to talk to someone who has died, and presumably has come back like a vampire? Coleridge has created this double meaning to make it ambiguous for both the Wedding-Guest and the readers to clearly understand what is going on, and thus prolong the suspense and infuse the story with more obscurity.

When the Polar Spirit releases the ship, the Mariner swoons and hears some voices before his "living life" returned. The underlying idea here is that there is another kind of life, so we are left to wonder whether it is life-in-death. When the ship returns to the land he wishes: "O let me be awake, my God! / Or let me sleep away" (lines 271-72). If these are the two human states, life and death, the question is what is he afraid of? And again, we are lead to the assumption that the Mariner has experienced another state, that of the living-dead, a vampire.

It has been stated three times that the Mariner has a "glittering eye," (line 3, 13 and 225) the look which keeps the Wedding-Guest's attentions and he cannot but hear his story. The mesmerizing effect of eyes as a vampire characteristic is adeptly employed here, although, it is a trait that can also be attributed to the Wandering Jew. The two figures need not actually be mutually exclusive, as they in a way supplement each other. The power of the eyes has been greatly emphasized as it is mentioned about twenty times within the poem. The Mariner cannot take his eyes away from the dead sailor's bodies and he can see the curse in their eyes:

"An orphan's curse would drag to hell

A spirit from on high;

But oh! More horrible than that

Is the curse in a dead man's eye!" (lines 259-62)

As Lane Cooper in *The Eye in Coleridge* suggests, "One person, or personified object, 'fixes' another; the 'fixed' person or object thereupon remains so for a sharply defined period: "Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse, /And yet I could not die" (p. 100). The Mariner is referred to as the "Bright-eyed Mariner", someone whose "eye is bright"; before seeing the specter ship the Mariner depicts the sailors looking in the distance "How glazed each weary eye"; the Hermit "raised his eyes" when he saw the Mariner in the boat; the Pilot's boy's "eyes went to and fro" as he went mad looking at the Mariner. Not only does the Mariner have this effect on the characters in the poem, but he is also depicted as hypnotized by the sailors as he is unable to take his eyes of the dead sailors:

"I closed my lids, and kept them close,

And the balls like pulses beat;

For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky

Lay dead like a load on my weary eye," (lines ?)

There is repetitive use of Christian vocabulary as a sign of his efforts to find his conventional orthodox values on the vastness of the unknown and facing supernatural destructive powers. He calls for help: "Heaven's Mother send us grace!" (line 179), is thankful to Mary for bringing him sleep "To Mary Queen the praise be given/ She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven," (lines 295-6); attributes his unaware blessing to the works of his saint: "Sure my kind saint took pity on me, / And I bless'd them unaware./" (lines 287-88) Even the action of blessing is a typically religious act, drawn from his traditional value system. But, what creatures does he bless? The water snakes bear recognizable associations with the biblical serpent, which destroyed the ideal world of Adam and Eve, by performing the same action of isolation. It is difficult to believe that it didn't occur to Coleridge to introduce some other water animals in order to avoid the biblical reference and their connection to evil. I think the author was aware that by introducing the blessing of the snakes, the Mariner actually identifies with them, and by doing so he forsakes the religious set of values which he had earlier followed. Being under the power of the Life-in-Death figure, he recognizes evil forces in himself that oppose his previous world view. He learns of the existence of evil forces and these forces become part of him.

The isolation that the specter ships represents itself, also brings isolation to the Mariner's ship by separating him from the rest of the crew who is doomed to die. The situation resembles the vampire's isolated status in society as this mythical creature lives next to humans but is feared, destroyed and not part of a community. The Mariner is able to see the curse in the eyes of the sailors as he has done a hideous deed for which the demonic forces that have possessed them had been unleashed. This is a proof of the existence of unexplained forces and principles governing the unknown. A Christian God would not condemn the Mariner for a simple bird slaughter to such horrific destiny, nor would the crew who did not participate in the act, but merely approved of it as they esteemed that the bird had brought them "mist and snow" (lines) deserve such terrible and sudden death. The traditional earthly mores would not convict two hundred men with death for approving an unaware killing of a bird. This newly acquainted world threatens to shake/diminish the system of values that was part of the Mariner's world so far.

Once exposed to evil, it becomes integral part of him no matter how much he tries to keep the old traditional values. Evil exists in the world, and it's frightening and life-suspending; it comes when you least expect, and occurs for no reason or by chance. Human values have been created by people and they only apply in the society and community they live in. Outside of it, the universe has its own rules not man-made, inexplicable, arbitrary and devastating. At the beginning of the journey, the world that the Mariner lives in is gradually challenged till the end of the poem. And, it is not only the Mariner's religion that is questioned, but family as a basic social unit and community as an indispensable human surrounding do not avoid examination. The narrative moves from community: at the beginning the Mariner and the two hundred men happily embark on a journey, to the breakdown of that small community on the ship and complete isolation in the sublime sea landscape. After the temporary death of the sailors the Mariner exclaims: "Alone, alone, all, all alone,/ Alone on a wide, wide sea!" (lines 234-35) The only action the Mariner performs to save the ship is performed depending solely on himself-biting his arm to be able to speak. And when the journey ends, as a sole survivor, again an isolated creature, he formally returns to the community he used to belong- it's the same lighthouse and church. But he is not the same person; he has changed. Even his return is not a complete return, as he is not essentially a part of the community: he does not take part in the festive ceremony, observes it from a distance, and when he speaks to people it is only to one

listener: "And he stoppeth one of three" (line2). The only company he chooses is himself - lonely contemplation with a prayer/in church. Although he seems to admire: "Old men, and babes, and loving friends, And youths and maidens gay!" (lines 609-10) as representation of community, by depicting people of different age and sex, the Mariner paradoxically represents the power of individualism.

The changes that the Mariner goes through are psychological, moral and social. He experiences an emotional and psychological crisis facing overwhelming demonic powers at sea which leads to deterioration of social relations and the domination of individualism at the end of the poem. In the last part of the poem we see the Mariner in solitary cheer seeing the crowd of people enjoying the festivities with their naïve belief in the benevolence of the world.

The supernatural figure of the vampire in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is used to establish the reality of alienated human existence. The Mariner's isolation, not only from other human beings, but also from God and the orthodox values he bears with himself, becomes evident when he comes across the otherworldly. With an act of "unawareness" he kills the only living creature that links them to the ordinary world. Cast somewhere beyond the realities of time and space and from human relationship, and enduring spiritual alienation because of his transgression, the Mariner is able to comprehend vast forces of the otherworldly which are not governed with the traditional rules of his previous world. As a result of the blood-shedding acts he performs, he is exposed to a supernatural experience, in which the encounter with the vampire figure Life-in-Death will enervate him and seize him in a transcendent state, beyond physical reality.

The Mariner in his new state of life-in-death is there to impart some knowledge to the Hermit and the Wedding-Guest and the subsequent ten thousand listeners (where is the fact from?). It is, however, knowledge of the revelation of some ubiquitous, malevolent forces which prowl and appear without warning. Our only option is to devote our lives to solitary prayer, hence the Mariner's advice at the end of the poem:

"'Tis sweeter far to me,

To walk together to the kirk

With a goodly company!—

To walk together to the kirk,

And all together pray," (lines 604-8)

The difficulty of making meaning of the moral that we have to deal with in order to gain complete understanding of the poem is perhaps rooted in the fact that the poem obscurely challenges the possibility of the existence of universal moral categories. The verse could be considered as the Mariner's struggle to understand his experience with the moral values that are incorporated in him. His inability to make any sense actually refers to the general non-existence of universal rules outside of human community. It could be that the poem's idea lies in presenting the main character's inability to gain complete understanding of its moral sense. Even seen in Christian terms as a sinful soul, the Mariner is evidently deprived of complete insight into the causes of his condition, as are we. The final statement, 'the dear God who loveth us, / He made and

loveth all,' appears to have no reference to his experience. If it is a loving God why would he make the Mariner suffer eternal punishment for what is only a minor offense? Coleridge unconvincing includes the moral which does not explain the Mariner's horrific experience. The moral leaves the poem's idea obscure and without unity mirroring the readers' inability to make sense of the world applying universal moral concepts.

Another less noticed confusing aspect of *The Ancient Mariner* is the fact that the fate of the Mariner and two hundred men is determined by the throw of dice. The fate of so many people on the ship is determined by the most arbitrary act like the throw of a dice. This fact robs the poem of any logical, rational or moral interpretation as well.

The lack of moral significance opens the gate for psychological interpretation of the effects of the disturbing powers the Mariner is exposed to. It is the existing arbitrariness that imposes the poem's reading as a major traumatic disruption in the Mariner's personality, the reason of which is attesting of the sudden death of his shipmates, according to David S. Miall (*The Predicament of The Ancient Mariner*, 1984). His reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* takes into account Robert Lifton's *Life in Death: Survivors of Hiroshima*, arguing that it is the death of the sailors, not the encounter with Life-in-Death which is the traumatic experience for the Mariner. He has undergone 'what may be called the survivor's 'death spell,'" (Lifton as seen in David Mill, p. 646). Lifton has explored the traumatic effects of the Hiroshima atomic bomb on the survivors, which corresponds to Coleridge's depiction of the Mariner after the experience on sea. Such a devastating encounter with death produces a "psychic closing-off" (p. 646) which occurs at the same time with an unjustified sense of guilt because they have survived, by considering themselves unworthy or merely being lucky. The Mariner's justification to the Wedding-Guest can be explained in this sense. 'Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding Guest!', he says, 'This body dropt not down.' The reason for his closing-off is his curse: he remained alive while all the others perished. His self-loathing is clear when he compares his existence with the disgusting sea creatures: 'A thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I.' (lines ?) His awareness of the rotting sea beneath with the slimy creatures point to himself, his inner state, but as his abilities are locked inside him and he is in a stasis, he is unable to pray. Furthermore, his psychological fixedness as a result from the guilt about the death of his crew is supported with the fixed image of the motionless ship: "As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean' as if it is a painted picture. The Mariner is entrapped in a psychic state from which no rescue seems to be imminent. Life-in-Death is the proper representation for this stasis.

However, as this poem suggests, the situation is not death, but resembles death. It is a state more horrific than death itself in which life is interrupted with eternal suffering. While the souls of the Mariner's shipmates move 'to bliss or woe,' he is stuck in a liminal condition. The lines describing the Life-in-Death figure: 'She is far liker Death than he; / Her flesh makes the still air cold' represent the paradox of living a life in death being as worse than death itself.

As this analysis has so far proved there are two sources for perturbation for the Mariner, his guilt over the death of his shipmates and the inability to experience death. The author has obviously evaded a unified structure of the poem especially with reference to the poem's moral.