

Jaws and the rime of the ancient mariner: supernatural morality tales

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The 1975 film, *Jaws* exploded onto theater screens as the first summer blockbuster and was immediately launched into modern popular culture (Sragow). The tale of the rogue man-eating shark terrorizing the small town of Amity Island, a town that appears to encapsulate and evoke nostalgia and Americana, and the trio of men who travel into the vast Atlantic to kill the huge Great White has become ingrained in American folklore. Although symbolism and meaning of the movie vary from person-to-person, the vastness of the sea and the unpredictable nature of the shark come to represent the familiar topic of mankind attempting to control nature and forces out of his control, and the chaos that ensues. Further, Spielberg's film explores the suffering of mankind through the lens of the aforementioned bloodthirsty shark. Over one hundred years earlier, in 1834, English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge published his major Romantic poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which explores supernatural elements of forces out of the control of men, and the mystical consequences that arise when control is attempted. The animals at the center of both tales, either the immense shark or the mysterious albatross hold numerous supernatural representations but ultimately lead to questions of fate, humanity, and the otherworldly, powerful forces. Further, these symbols remind the men of each of the pieces that the mystical nature of the seemingly endless ocean depths cannot be controlled. Both *Jaws* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are tales of transformation, stories within stories, that demonstrate the damaging effects of trying to control forces of nature, and also trying to understand these forces.

Both Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the film, *Jaws* implement elements of folklore, becoming lodge within popular culture. In both pieces of media, there are elements of nested narratives. Coleridge's poem utilizes a framing device; the story of an ill-fated ship and the albatross is told to a guest at a wedding by an old and hardened sailor who was a member of the voyage (Coleridge, Line 21). By relating the events of the poem through a story, the mariner is somewhat distanced from the tale. The mariner is attempting to control how the story is told, yet, even in his retelling, the events remain out of his control. The shift in the narrator's reliability most notably when the narration of the poem shifts from the third person in the early part of the poem to the first person. Control of the story begins to slip away as the narration is split into two: the mariner, in telling his tale, only delivers the information that he wants to tell. Yet, as the narration shifts into the third person, other details regarding the events on the ship and the disturbed reactions of the listener emerge (Coleridge, Line 31, 40). Further, as the story of the events progresses, it becomes obvious that the titular mariner is haunted by his killing of the albatross and he seems to find relief in telling the story to others, hypnotizing listeners to the horror and trapping them in his despair. The narrative structuring of Coleridge's poem symbolizes the lack of control that the characters within the story have over their fate and lives. Regarding *Jaws*, there is a similar occurrence of a story-within-the-story as Captain Quint tells the story of the disastrous events upon the USS *Indianapolis* and cruelty of the sea. Based upon true events, Quint establishes his tumultuous and haunting relationship with the unpredictable sea and the uncontrollable forces that lurk beneath. It

is through the melancholic and strangely beautiful delivery of events that sets the tone and foreshadows what is to come, as well as man's inability to conquer the sea. The narrative devices implemented in both Coleridge's major poem and *Jaws* create a feeling of close personal intimacy: the stories seem like folklore, passed down from one person to another, both seeming to be morality tales. The fate of all characters involved in both pieces is often pre-determined and unchangeable.

One of the most striking and symbolic commonalities between the film *Jaws* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is the central focus in each on an animal. The animals in both hold special symbolic meaning. Notably, both animals are of impressive size, striking both awe and fear in the men who look upon them in each tale. The size is representative of the lack of mankind's control when dealing with forces of nature. In Coleridge's poem, the albatross is representative of the fine line between stability and chaos. The killing of the large sea bird and the fallout that follows is the result of what occurs when the line is crossed. The albatross is a mythical and unexplainable force, and following its killing, the men aboard the ship that stormy night are "met with divine retribution" (Judson). The men on board the ship had prescribed meaning onto the bird, believing the wind and their luck to be associated with the albatross (Coleridge, Line 71). However, once the bird is shot by the old mariner with a crossbow and the fate of the sailors becomes increasingly dire and grim, the sea bird comes to signify punishment by forces, likely supernatural, beyond the control of the characters. The sailors force the mariner to be constantly reminded of his

impulsive, momentary decision. “ Instead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung” (Coleridge, Lines 141-142). It is after appreciating and understanding the untamable power of nature that the mariner is finally relieved of his sins and then the albatross falls off his neck. The great white shark, stalking the waters off Amity Island, arrives during the Fourth of July festivities, causing chaos and threatening to dismantle the order of the town. Those who enter the water, the shark’s domain, meet their demise in a horrifying manner. There is no clear understanding of why the shark has gone rogue or has chosen the particular location it did to conduct its rampage. The characters, whose theories on the reasoning of the shark, whether scientific or folkloric, are left unanswered. There is no explicit reason as to why. Forces of nature cannot be understood. Similar in power and meaning to the albatross in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the shark arrives when characters in the film attempt to control nature. In *Jaws*, this attempted control of nature occurs through the villainous Mayor Vaughn’s commodification of the beach for the holiday. The Mayor himself resembles the loathsome Great White shark in many ways: he is ruthless, hungry for superiority, and destroys the lives of many in Amity by keeping the beaches open, despite the numerous gruesome attacks and mounting problem. The Mayor is complicit with the shark and allows the animal to continue its killing spree. Through the Mayor’s greedy decision, Amity descends into a sort of frenzy; hunting and killing sharks with vigor in real-life and in video games. The incidents of mass shark hunting only further the idea that the shark is a perhaps, like the albatross, a punishment for abusing and attempting to control nature.

Following the killing of the albatross, during a “weary time,” (Coleridge, Line 143), Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s major poem begins to take on a notable supernatural quality (Line 157). Yet, even before the mariner begins his tale, there is an eeriness that lurks even in the opening lines. The appearance of the narrator, described by the wedding guest as a “grey-beard loon,” (Line 11), seems to resemble a creature of the supernatural. It is later in the poem that the reality and truth become hazy. Forced for seven days and seven nights to look upon the dead faces of his fellow sailors (Lines 253-262), the mariner must contend with his actions, yet he does not perish, his penance seeming otherworldly. Even before Death makes an appearance, there is a foreboding sense that something is amiss. The fog and the ice symbolize the cold, lifelessness ahead (Lines 58-64). Further, the personification of the ice and nature demonstrates the vengeance and strength of nature: “The ice was all around/ It crack’d and growl’d, and roar’d and howl’d/ Like noises in a swound” (Line 60-62). The eeriness that Death’s embodiment evokes adds to the mystical, mythological quality of the poem. The mystery and horror, as well as the entire otherworldly and separate feeling, only further adds to the aforementioned folkloric quality of the poem. The poem, stylistically, resembles a tale passed down from person to person. The fate of the titular mariner lies upon a thin line, dependent on a game of dice between Death and the beautiful Death-in-Life (Line 196), and even though the personified Death does not win, the mariner is forced to live the rest of his life with the burden of his actions, and the forever knowledge of the close relationship of life and death. The crew aboard the doomed ship attribute the natural movements of the ocean and wave patterns, as well as the changes in

weather to supernatural or divine forces, still not fully accepting the power of nature (Line 65-66). Instead, they believe that there must be something they cannot understand controlling the events. Therefore, the mariner and the crew must learn to respect nature and God's creatures and accept the superior power of nature and its creatures, as well as understand the grave danger that arises if a person attempts to understand or conquer these forces. "The other was a softer voice/As soft as honey-dew/Quoth he, 'The man hath penance done/ And penance more will do'" (Lines 406-409).

Whereas the supernatural elements of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are at the forefront of the poem, *Jaws* also deals with otherworldly and unexplainable events. The shark itself appears to possess a distinct knowledge of the chaos it has created, and knowledge of when and where to appear to wreak the most havoc. At one point, after the shark swims underneath the boat, Quint remarks, "he's a smart...fish" (1: 17. 42), slowly understanding that there is something remarkably different about this shark. The shark is endowed strange, frightening abilities that seem to make the Great White far too intelligent and calculating to be a normal shark. For instance, during one notable attack in an estuary, the shark tips over a small boat and then circles back around, a scene that not only maximizes suspense, but displays the massive size of the creature, just below the surface of the water, and still somewhat concealed. The sheer size of the shark propels the animal into mythic, alien territory: neither Hooper, a marine biologist nor Quint, a seasoned shark hunter, have ever witnessed a shark even close to the size of the shark hunting humans along the New

England coast. In addition, the shark is resistant to bullets, the harpoons deployed, as well as numerous other injuries that would normally prove to be fatal to other sharks. The shark, at first, appears to be indestructible, a force that cannot be stopped and is much more than a single-minded animal. Quint's famous and haunting monologue further mythologizes the shark as a supernatural force: "You know the thing about a shark, he's got lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eyes. When he comes at you, doesn't seem to be living. Until he bites you and those black eyes roll over white..." (1: 31. 00-1: 31. 22). Not only does the quotation establish Quint's relationship with sharks, but the dialogue also evokes an image of an evil and uncontrollable shark. Through his story, Quint releases and shares the trauma of what he witnessed during the disaster, not unlike the mariner relating his story to the wedding guest, both looking for some sort of catharsis. As the shark, possibly finishing what the sharks of the USS Indianapolis disaster could not, finally attacks and kills Quint, somewhat spectacularly so, it becomes obvious that the shark of Jaws is different from any other. Perhaps the shark punishment for Amity Island's greed, and inability to appreciate the natural beauty of the ocean, without monetizing it. Through this lens, the shark is penance, like the albatross of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, forcing the residents to redeem themselves of their sins of attempting to control the natural world. Once human control is stripped away, the residents of Amity Island must recognize that they are truly powerless when it comes to the ocean and what lurks beneath. The supernatural power of the shark demonstrates the fragility of society and class, and the utter chaos that ensues when these structures ultimately fail by the far greater force of the natural world.

Both *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Jaws* are both Romantic, folkloric tales that share a commonality of men going to sea and encountering natural forces that cannot be explained, eliciting feelings of both awe and fear. Within Coleridge's poem, questions arise regarding the reliability of the narrator and whether or not the account of the events he speaks of can be trusted. By framing the tale of the mariner and the mysterious events onboard the ship as a story-within-a-story, the poem resembles a morality tale. The lesson of the albatross and the guilt that the mariner feels act as a lesson for readers to always control and appreciate the forces that are out of man's control. Further, there is a lesson regarding impulsivity and the effects that rash decisions can have. The mariner has learned his lesson, but he is forced to bear the price of his sin forever, even though the albatross no longer hangs around his neck. While the killing of the albatross was an impulsive and thoughtless choice, in *Jaws*, the killing of the shark, while is not exactly planned, is far more planned with the knowledge that good will be restored upon killing the animal. This is a crucial difference between the two, maritime, tales. Chief Brody and the other men aboard the *Orca* understand that the shark must be killed for peace to be restored in Amity Island and the structures of power and class can be put back into place. *Jaws* too implements elements of classic morality tales. The greed and villainy of the Mayor and the subsequent events that follow his choice to keep the beaches open solely for profit highlight the sin of monetizing natural beauty and structures. Further, the chaos that ultimately ensues reveals the fragility of structures that are believed to maintain societal control. Both the albatross and the massive Great White sharks of both pieces of media teach

the characters of each to appreciate the natural world as well as the supernatural, unexplainable elements associated. The blank, seemingly endless waters of both Jaws and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner act as a canvas, providing a dangerous opportunity for the characters to try to paint the sea with their own ideas. Yet, as each story demonstrates, it becomes apparent that mankind is no match for the power of nature, and even when power is attempted to be enacted over the sea, the sea proves to be superior.