

A warning against hubris



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Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a tale in which one simple action leads to a tumbling of catastrophic events. When the Mariner shoots the Albatross, a bird who has brought him and his sailors good fortune, he does so without reason. In ancient Greek tragedies hubris, or excessive pride, often leads to the hero's inevitable downfall. Further, in the Catholic faith, pride is one of the greatest sins a person could commit. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* illustrates how these beliefs are held in good faith. Without a reason given to justify the senseless killing of the bird, one can insinuate that the Mariner's senseless killing of the bird could only be through pride. His self-pleasure of bringing down a great creature was fleeting, as punishment soon bore down upon the sailors. Through his excessive pride, ungratefulness, and ignorance of other's wishes, the Mariner brought disaster upon himself and his crew.

In the beginning of the tale, the Mariner stops a wedding-guest to tell him the story of his defeat, as he is compelled to do. In the story, the Mariner is sailing through an area of mist and ice after being pushed by a storm. The crew was having great difficulty until an Albatross appeared, which cleared the fog and broke the ice to safely guide the ship through the sea. As the Mariner states, "The ice did split did split with a thunder-fit; / The helmsman steered us through! / And a good south wind sprung up behind..." (Norton 445). The Albatross, a great sea-bird, was determined to be a bird of good omen, and was received joyously by the crew. However, the Mariner did not heed their gratitude:

" God save thee, ancient Mariner!

From the fiends, that plague thee thus! —

Why look'st thou so?" —

With my cross-bow

I shot the Albatross. (Norton 445-446)

In the passage above the wedding-guest is commending the Mariner on his good fortune; however, the Mariner cuts him off in one simple line. He did not provide an explanation for his actions or a reasonable cause as to why he would kill such a bird. It seems to be an insensible act, to slay a creature that has helped them survive. However, the Albatross is a great, rare sea-bird and to slay a great creature is an act worth boasting. Thus, against the wishes of his crew, he shot the Albatross in hopes of achieving glory and status.

The Mariner's crew was outraged at the killing of the Albatross. They cried out in against the crime committed:

For all averred, I had killed the bird

That made the breeze to blow.

Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay

That made the breeze to blow! (Norton 446).

The crew saw what the Mariner did not: that the slaughter of a creature who had aided them in their journey was a horrendous crime. However, soon after the Albatross is killed the fog clears; this causes them to doubt the very

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belief they held so strongly: “’Twas right, said they, such birds to slay / That bring the fog and mist” (Norton 446). Justifying the crime against a righteous creature named the crew as partners in the crime. Thus, one must hold fast in one’s beliefs, for if one wavers, the doubt may cause one’s downfall.

Shortly after, the ship is plagued by a drought and the sea begins to crawl with slimy creatures. The crew begins to fear that the slaying of the Albatross brought evil upon them. They attempted to place the blame on the Mariner by forcing him to hang the dead Albatross around his neck: “ Instead of the cross, the Albatross about my neck was hung” (Norton 447). This simple act of hanging the Albatross around his neck like a crucifix is significant. The act of wearing a crucifix is to show faith; the Albatross hangs around the Mariner’s neck in a grotesque imitation of faith. In reality, he wears the Albatross as an admission of pride and because his crew could not accept their own blame. It can even be taken further to imply that Coleridge is attempting to portray the Mariner as a mock Jesus figure. Just as Jesus Christ bore the sins of his people, the Mariner is bearing the sins of his crew. In this way, the crew hopes to escape judgment.

However, the distribution of blame did not work. It soon becomes apparent that the blame that one holds for a crime cannot be erased or handed off, for soon a ship captained by the spirits Death and Night-mare Life-in-Death appear and one by one the entire crew dies. The Mariner describes this horror, “ And every soul, it passed me by, / Like the whizz of my cross-bow!” (Norton 449). It is interesting to note that the Mariner compares the shooting of the Albatross with his cross-bow to the departing of the souls of his crew. The simile made here implies that the Mariner does associate the death of

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his sailors with his crime against the Albatross, and here is where the reader first realizes that the Mariner does feel guilt for his crime. This is further confirmed when he states, " And never a saint took pity on / My soul in agony" (Norton 449). Since the Mariner actually committed the slaughter, he bears the worst punishment. While his crew is dying all around him, he does not, but is forced to live with his guilt. To illustrate the depth of his guilt, the Mariner states, " And a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I" (Norton 450). However, in his guilt he appreciates the water-snakes and blesses them, and this small act redeems him. The Albatross that he bore around his neck like a grotesque trophy slipped from his neck and into the sea, like chains being lifted from around him.

When the Mariner wakes, his dead crew rises and begins to steer the ship. However, their bodies do not contain the souls that they bore previously; instead, the bodies are commanded by angelic spirits. The ship moves through the water with a supernatural force. After the Mariner faints, he hears to voices explaining the situation. He hears:

" Is it he?" quoth one, " Is this the man?

By him who died on cross,

With his cruel bow he laid full low

The harmless Albatross. (Norton 453-454) Again, the voice references Jesus Christ as the one who died on the cross in order for the reader to see the Mariner as a grotesque comparison to the Jesus. A second voice warns, "... '

The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do" (Norton 454), implying that the Mariner's torment is not yet over.

The Mariner's suffering continues after he reaches land. By some compulsion, he tells his story to everyone that he meets: " And till my ghastly tale is told, / This heart within me burns" (Norton 458).

The reader could insinuate that this particular punishment is given to the Mariner to serve as a warning to others. Through the repeated telling of his tale, the Mariner shames himself. Again and again the Mariner must admit to his wrongdoing and reiterate what happened to his crew due to his hubris. The very admittance of the crime is the opposite of pride, and for that reason it is a fitting punishment. Furthermore, the spirit could have given this punishment to the Mariner to instill more awareness into others. This is illustrated when the Mariner finishes telling his tale to the wedding-guest and he left the wedding stunned. Coleridge states:

He went like one that hath been stunned,

And is of sense forlorn.

A sadder and a wiser man,

He rose the morrow morn. (Norton 459)

In this stanza, it is apparent that the Mariner's tale served as a warning. The wedding-guest learned from the Mariner's mistake and grew wiser; he is less likely to make the same mistake as the Mariner. Perhaps hubris can only be counteracted through shame, as that is the only way one can truly negate an

internal vice. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner's central theme of pride can serve several different purposes. It can serve to warn against the excessive arrogance, the desire for glory, the ignoring of other's desires and beliefs, and the passing of blame from one person to the other. Through the tragic tale of the Mariner and his crew, the reader can infer that humility and gratitude are always good virtues to possess, one must always be respectful of another's wishes, and pride can only be negated by shame. The Mariner's tale teaches the reader many important lessons, and perhaps that is why Coleridge chose to write it down: to serve as a warning against hubris.