

Climax and anti-
climax in the road,
the rime of the
ancient mariner and
the great...



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Climaxes are moments of increased tension which signify a central turning point within a text. Anti-climaxes can be defined as moments which subvert expectations as they provide a plot twist which are marked by decreased intensity. This essay reviews climaxes in several works.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the shooting of the road rat early on in the narrative is a particularly climatic episode. McCarthy utilises this to convey from the beginning that the man is willing to sacrifice his morality to survive and to protect his son. The episode is characterised by several pages of unattributed dialogue which physically convey it as essential to the novel and create a moment of heightened tension between the protagonists and the road rat. Without any interruption from the third person narrator, we are offered an intimate perception of the incident which enhances our understanding of the man as the boy's protector. It is increasingly climatic because we are able to witness, at a closer distance, the extent to which the man will go to protect his son: "If you look at him again I'll shoot you." Adding to this, the episode enables McCarthy to establish the road rat as a microcosm for the wider fiends who inhabit the post-apocalyptic world, whom the man and boy refer to broadly as the "bad guys". This is because the road rat is revealed to be a cannibal with McCarthy utilising lexis connoting animalistic traits to describe the character. He is introduced as having "eyes collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk". The animal imagery suggests the road rat's lack of a moral conscience which intensifies the encounter as we feel frightened for the man and boy's survival. We fear that the episode may see the demise of the man allowing the novel to be a narrative based solely on the boy's survival. Also, the road rat is described

with the tricolon “lean, wiry, rachitic” which separates him further from the man and boy with his inhumane appearance, fuelling further our fears for the characters safety.

In addition, the man and boy’s arrival at the bunker can be perceived as a climatic event. It signifies a turning point in the narrative as structurally, it follows an episode of increased despair in the cellar with the “blackened and burnt” bodies. McCarthy creates a clear parallel between both places: they are both physically “padlocked” and provoke religious exclamations from the man (“Oh Christ” for the cellar and “Oh my God” for the bunker). The parallel which is perhaps most noticeable is the boy’s discrepancy towards both places. For the cellar, he says “Papa let’s not go up there” and similarly, for the cellar he warns “don’t open it, Papa”. This ensures that the discovery of the bunker is all the more climatic because the boy’s reaction to both places is disturbingly similar and hence, we are kept in a state of increased tension as we await to view what the man and boy will face in the bunker. We are fully able to perceive how they must constantly put their safety at risk to survive and are forced to enter a place to be able to deem it safe or dangerous. Also, the protagonists discover “crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots” in the bunker which juxtaposes with the “hideous” scene witnessed in the cellar. Some argue that the bunker symbolises hope which is climatic after an episode of such horror. This is because it is discovered at a time when the man and boy are in dire need of food, emphasised by the boy’s physical state: “starved, exhausted, sick with fear”. It is described as the “richness of a vanished world” which evokes some readers to link the bunker with the paradise

offered by the garden of Eden, reinforcing the episode as climatic due to its hopeful and religious connotations.

Alternatively, the protagonists arrival at the “ south” which they journey to throughout much of the narrative highlights a particularly anticlimactic event. Whilst the man and boy anticipate a welcoming environment with “ good guys”, they are enter a landscape devoid of hope which is not much different to the other areas they come across in their journey. Some readers regard this “ gray beach” as representing the futility of the characters journey and ultimately, evokes a pessimistic response from them with regards to the ending of the novel. Conversely, the bathetic nature of the episode is perhaps best understood as revealing what we already knew about the world the man and boy inhabit. The sea which “ is not blue” conforms to the portrayal of the bleak landscape created by McCarthy throughout the course of the novel and so, should not be a shock to us. There is a parallel between the man’s response to the landscape at the beginning (he sees it as “ Barren. Silent. Godless.”) to his response to the sea (“ Cold. Desolate. Birdless.”) This depicts the episode as anticlimactic because the man “ could see the disappointment on [the boy’s] face” and the hopefulness of the characters seems to flounder.

In Coleridge’s ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the first climax appears when the Mariner shoots an albatross which “ did follow” his ship “ every day”. We distinguish the event as one which behaves as a catalyst for the remainder of the poem as it triggers the Mariner’s curse and the exploration of the consequences of this single action. The event is notably climactic because the albatross is linked closely to religion and becomes a

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symbol of spirituality as it “ perch’d for vespers nine”. Hence, the Mariner’s admitting that “ with my crossbow/ I shot the albatross” comes as a unprecedented shock to us as there seems to be no clear motive behind the killing and arguably, implies the Mariner’s ignorance and inability to respect God’s creatures. Some argue that Coleridge utilises the climax created to reveal the Mariner’s horrifying rejection of religion. This could be related to the killing of Christ who was persecuted with no legitimate reason and under immoral consciences. The scene is made more climatic with the dramatic interjection of the wedding guest before the Mariner reveals his crime: “ God save thee, ancient Mariner...Why look’st thou?” The fact that the guest must question the Mariner’s well being highlights how devastating it is for him to retell the details of his crime and the immensity of his guilt.

Furthermore, this climatic sequence in the beginning is brought to a stand still with the stagnation of the sea. This is a particularly anticlimactic moment because we expect the Mariner to serve the consequences for his thoughtless killing almost instantly. However, Coleridge subverts this and introduces the “ silent sea” which the crew enter as “ the first that ever burst”. The word “ burst” demonstrates their violent entrance which contrasts with the “ silent sea” with the sibilance creating an atmosphere of impending doom. This further develops the anticlimactic moment because with such a violent entrance, we anticipate a dramatic sequence of events. Instead, Coleridge reveals how the ship was “ stuck, nor breath nor motion”. “ Nor” has negative connotations which perhaps emphasises the absence of life in the sea and thus, how isolated the crew are. Also, the ship’s stagnation is described as being “ as idle as a painted ship/Upon a painted ocean”. The

simile depicts the stillness of the ship with the idea of it being a like a 'painting', implicating the ship's inability to make progress. From Coleridge's gloss (" And the albatross begins to be avenged") we can deduce that the stillness, despite being anticlimactic, is a direct effect of the albatross being " shot".

Additionally, a climatic moment is arguably the Mariner having " blessed them [the water snakes] unaware" and the albatross falling from his neck. Having already established the albatross as symbol of religion from the very beginning, Coleridge utilises the act of it falling from the Mariner's neck as a physical representation of his guilt being alleviated. Following the " seven days, seven nights, I [the Mariner] saw that curse", Coleridge implies how although it was time which led to the Mariner's change in perception, the eventual shift is sudden: " a spring of love gushed form my heart". The word " gushed" intensifies the moment as it captures the rapidness of the Mariner's blessing and reinforces the idea that he is " unaware" of what he is doing. This forms part of the climax because we are left anticipating whether the Mariner's redemption will be complete or if he has to suffer far graver consequences for his killing. Also, the actual moment the " the albatross fell off, and sank like lead into the sea" is significantly climatic because the simile compares the albatross to " lead" which we associate to weight and illustrates the immensity of the Mariner's guilt. As it falls, the Mariner is able to pray (" To Mary Queen the praise be given!") and sleep (" Oh sleep! It is a gentle thing").

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy in chapter 5 is particularly anticlimactic. This is their first encounter <https://assignbuster.com/climax-and-anti-climax-in-the-road-the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner-and-the-great-gatsby/>

after the ending of their short lived romance “ five short years ago” and understandably, we apprehend it to reignite the passion of their previous romance and for Daisy to live up to Gatsby’s dream version of her. However, the encounter becomes anticlimactic with our expectations being reverted as it becomes clear that Daisy fails to embody Gatsby’s dream vision of her with Gatsby himself exclaiming to Nick that “ this is a terrible mistake”. Also, there is a notable lack of dialogue between Gatsby and Daisy which forces us to focus on their body language. Gatsby keeps “ his hands in his pockets” and even knocks over “ a defunct mantelpiece clock”. This highlights the initial awkwardness of the moment which is anticlimactic as it is not a display of the passion we envisaged. Gatsby’s clumsy action of knocking over the clock depicts his unsuccessful attempt to recapture the past through this meeting with Daisy. Adding to this, as the incident with the clock takes place, it is ‘ pouring’ with rain which demonstrates how Gatsby is at the height of his discomfort and this fails to be a turning point in the narrative as Gatsby does not reawaken the love he felt five years ago. Even Nick himself remarks “ there must have been moments...when Daisy tumbled short of his dream”. This conveys how the encounter which should have left Gatsby feeling one step closer to his dream of being with Daisy is anticlimactic due to the “ colossal vitality of his illusion”. It reveals the delusional quality of Gatsby’s vision and validates the problems with “ living too long with a single dream”.

Moreover, the deaths of both Myrtle and Gatsby are climatic. The deaths of both characters are never directly revealed and only told through the response of other characters. Myrtle’s “ life violently extinguished” and her “

thick dark blood with the dust". Her death is significant as it leaves no one for Tom to construct his affair with and this seems to have affected him greatly: "tears were overflowing down his face". This is a turning point in the novel because it is arguably the first time in which we come close to feeling sympathy for him as prior to his display of emotion, we perceive him as controlling and treating people "as though he were moving a checker to another square." Also, some readers view Myrtle's death as leaving a "reel of chaos in its wake". This is not only due to Tom losing his mistress, but also as a result of the complications it leaves between Gatsby and Daisy. Both characters are not able to develop their relationship fully and they seem more distanced following the death as Daisy makes no conscientious effort to stop Gatsby from taking the blame for Myrtle's death to save her.

In addition, Gatsby's death is climatic because it perhaps signifies the death of the American Dream as well. This is because Fitzgerald establishes Gatsby as the embodiment of the American Dream with his reinvention from 'James Gatz' to the more glamorous and prosperous 'Jay Gatsby'. He represents 'new money' which is in line with the American Dream's ideal of 'perseverance resulting in success'. Hence, his death symbolises the ending of the American Dream and arguably Fitzgerald's belief that the American Dream itself is corrupt and unable to be truly successful. Linking it to Gatsby's demise brings the novel towards a climatic end because we do not anticipate such a horrific end for our protagonist. Some readers argue that Gatsby's death is made more climatic by the fact that we expect him to be murdered for his criminal connections rather than for Myrtle's death which he was not even responsible for. Also, Gatsby was killed in his pool and his

choice to use his pool on the “ first day of autumn” illustrates a defiance of the change in seasons and his inability to leave the past behind. We note this as crucial to the narrative because it is his desire to recapture the past which perhaps leads to his death. It is final and poignant reminder of the possibly fatal consequences of trying to reshape the past into the present.