

Samuel Taylor  
Coleridge addresses  
humanity's  
relationship to the  
natural world



To the same extent that the Ancient Mariner entrances the Wedding-Guest with his 'glittering eye,' Samuel Taylor Coleridge sought to draw his audience in to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). The poem, written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is constructed using various elements associated with the traditional ballad form of poetry. These elements, including the literary form the words take, the narrative style and the subject matter encourage the reader to associate the content with pre-modernity. However it is through the allegorical aspect of the ballad form that the ambiguity of emphasis on both modernity and pre-modernity in relation to nature is most pronounced. A later version of the poem further expands upon this, but simultaneously changes the nature of this relationship.

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834), the final revision of the poem, many differences to the original are evident. As an effect of modernising the archaic diction, adding marginal glosses and omitting certain passages, Coleridge largely removed the pre-modern critique of society. In turn, a moral interpretation is imposed on the reader. By assessing the differences between the two ballads, the idea that nature is above human perception is evident. It is in this vein that Coleridge not only addresses, but enacts, humanity's relationship with the natural world in the nineteenth century.

*The Ancient Mariner* (1798) is written distinctly in the form of the traditional ballad. By adhering to certain strictures typical of the ballad form, the poem places emphasis on the past. This looks back to the Western folklore culture and explicitly attributes its themes to pre-modernity. The literary form used by the *Ancient Mariner* (1798) is based loosely on short ballad stanzas and a regular rhyme scheme:

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The wedding-guest sat on a stone,

He cannot choose but hear:

And thus spake on that ancient man,

The bright-eyed Mariner.

The effect of the heavily accented syllables and pronounced rhyme scheme produces a chant-like effect that 'draws the reader in' just as the wedding guest was. The diction, exemplified above in the words 'sate' 'choose' and 'Mariner' were archaic even in the nineteenth century. Through this structure, the poem shares an affinity with the traditional ballad form, which was passed on orally from 'listener to listener, culture to culture.'

More characteristics of the ballad are displayed in the style of narrative that is used. In the *Ancient Mariner* (1798) minimal descriptive detail in setting and characters is given. A 'long grey beard and ... glittering eye' are the only traits of the Mariner which are commented on, even the characters' names, the 'Ancient Mariner' and 'the wedding-guest,' are vague. In describing only the immediate action within the Mariner's story, Coleridge opens the poem up to the reader's interpretation. This quality further likened the *Ancient Mariner* (1798) to the traditional form of the ballad. Using this traditional form, each speaker would impress upon the ballad his or her own personal vision of the story.

The subject matter of the nautical, the supernatural and superstition associated with the ballad form was utilised by Coleridge as he critiqued

both pre-modernity and modernity within the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*  
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(1798). Coleridge achieved this through exploiting the ambiguous nature of these themes, which he conveyed through imagery and allegory.

The nautical theme is not only typical of the traditional ballads and therefore encouraging of a view of a pre-modern era, but it also alludes to the maritime expansion occurring during the nineteenth century. This nautical theme is shown through diction which is actually a fusion of words from travel books, traditional ballads and the works of Chaucer, Spenser and Chatterton. As people mobilised, they became more detached from their backgrounds. In conjunction with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, respect for nature was changing as people of the nineteenth century placed value on the evolving technology and transport.

When the ship is stranded in the ocean and the Mariner recalls "Alone, alone, all alone/ Alone on the wide wide Sea" Coleridge implies how vulnerable humanity is in relation to the natural world. This was to comment on the growing view of man's superiority over nature. This example is one way in which the ballad sets ambiguous morals critiquing both pre-modernity and modernity.

This ambiguity in interpretation of the moral develops further through the themes of superstition and the supernatural, which are also themes consistent with the traditional form of the ballad. The Ancient Mariner (1798) creates this effect through the allegory of the albatross.

Through the Mariner's superstitious conceptualisation of the albatross, the allegory is directed at the unreliable superstitions of pre-modernity. The relationship between the albatross and the people on the ship is also a <https://assignbuster.com/samuel-taylor-coleridge-addresses-humanitys-relationship-to-the-natural-world/>

metaphor for the relationship between all of humanity and the natural world in Coleridge's time. This conflicting relationship was evident in modernity as the Industrial Revolution conflicted with the ideology of the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century. The albatross is initially 'hail'd in God's name' as it breaks through the ice surrounding the ship. It is then mistaken for 'the fiends that plague thee thus' and shot by the Mariner. He then admits to having done 'an hellish thing' as he had 'killed the Bird/ that made the Breeze to blow,' the breeze being the saviour which released the boat from the ice. This view of nature is further complicated as the people aboard the ship proclaim " 'Twas right... such birds to slay/ That bring the fog and mist' as the sun comes out. This changing attitude towards the albatross, which is quite removed from the events attributed to it, is representative of the capricious relationship humanity had with the natural world in and the nineteenth century.

It is also notable it was the breeze that caused 'The Ice [to] split with a Thunder-fit.' Coleridge implies that only nature can contend with the natural world. Although the men on the ship conceptualise the bird as the yielder of power over events, the reader can see that not one solitary part of nature that reigns supreme. Rather the conditions are controlled by forces of nature in a way that is beyond human conception. It is through this idea that the ability for nature to be viewed as something to be feared and awe-inspiring simultaneously is explained.

It can be concluded that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) uses the traditional form of the ballad as a vehicle to highlight the capricious

relationship between humanity and the natural world in Coleridge's time and <https://assignbuster.com/samuel-taylor-coleridge-addresses-humanitys-relationship-to-the-natural-world/>

that of pre-modernity. However, Coleridge did not stop there. Between 1800 and 1834 he published a further five versions. By the sixth publication, the archaic diction had been modernised, marginal glosses were added and various other parts of the poem were changed. This final version of the poem is entitled *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834). The result of these revisions is that the ambiguity in meaning of the poem is altered.

After the publication of the initial *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) critics made comment on the deviance of the *Ancient Mariner* (1798) from the conventions of the time and the characteristics of the imminent Romantic era. In order to conform to the cultural norms Coleridge modernised the language. 'The Mariners gave it biscuit-worms/ And round and round it flew' was changed to 'It ate the food it ne'er had eat/ And round and round it flew.' The modernised spelling and vocabulary changed the degree of ambiguity in the *Ancient Mariner* (1834) as it toned down the emphasis on pre-modernity. It minimised the strangeness and grotesqueness of the poem. The *Ancient Mariner* (1834) omits certain lines for this reason also. 'His bones were black with many a crack/ All black and bare, I ween' becomes 'A gust of wind sterte up behind/ And whistled thro' his bones.' The latter version is less typical of the ballad form and reflects the more natural and less grotesque elements associated with Romanticism. While it still conformed to the traditional ballad form, the removal of the archaic diction made the emphasis on a critique of nineteenth century much more explicit.

The most prominent difference between the two versions of the poem was the addition of marginal glosses to the *Ancient Mariner* (1834). By adding these glosses, an interpretation of the moral was imposed upon the poem.

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There has been much discussion about this addition over the years. There was a great deal of pressure placed on Coleridge to adhere more to the stylistic tendencies of Romanticism.

The first gloss describes the wedding guests as 'three gallants.' This imposes a prejudice upon the characters in defining their clothing and social class. In offering a description of characters and circumstances in this more explicit manner, the reader's judgement is shaped accordingly and therefore room for ambiguity in moral or interpretation is diminished. This is substantiated by the view that 'the activity of the reader's eye, skipping back and forth between the margin and the text, performs the work once left to the imagination.'

It is therefore apparent that in examining the different approaches to the traditional form of the ballad between the *Ancient Mariner* (1798) and the *Ancient Mariner* (1834) that different morals are implied. In the first version, through its strict adherence to the traditional ballad form, an ambiguous critique of pre-modernity and modernity is insinuated. However it is through the final version of the poem humanity's relationship to nature in the nineteenth century is revealed. In adapting the original *Ancient Mariner* (1798) five times in response to criticism, Coleridge changes the moral within his poem and unwittingly enforces his own critique of humanity - that of man's fickle relationship with it. From the different ways nature is portrayed, for example, through the metaphor of the albatross, through man's relationship with it in response to the Industrial Revolution, and through the fact that Coleridge published six adaptations of the poem it is evident that nature is beyond human perception.

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