

Isolation in "the rime
of the ancient
mariner" and
"stanzas written in
dejection,..."



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Amongst the ideas presented in the poems *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples*, the theme of isolation is prominent. Although Coleridge's poem departs from Romantic stylistic tendencies, it exemplifies many of the ideas which defined the era, while Shelley uses a more typical Spenserian stanza form, manipulating this to enhance a sense of isolation throughout the poem. Both poets explore isolation in different ways throughout their poems - specifically, Shelley uses the theme of 'dejection', referenced in the title, to present his feelings of sadness as something he experiences very much alone.

Stanzas written in Dejection, near Naples is written in first person, again emphasizing Shelley's feeling of isolation - he is the only one present in his poem - otherwise, there is only the nature that surrounds him. For example, he begins the poem by describing an idyllic scene by the sea - 'The sun is warm, the sky is clear,/The waves are dancing fast and bright', and only in the second stanza does he introduce himself into the poem. Similarly, much of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is written in first person while he is telling his story, so we are able to get just his (the Mariner's) version of events and his feelings of loneliness. Separation from others, therefore inducing isolation is prominent throughout both poems - Shelley refers to 'others' and 'they' rather than including himself with his fellow people - he seems to see himself as separate because his 'cup has been dealt in another measure'. This suggests he sees isolation as something that he has no control over - using the passive, 'dealt', it is by another hand that his 'cup' is unlike everyone else's, those who 'call life pleasure'.

This feeling of 'dejection' is likely because of what he was experiencing at the time the poem was written - his wife indirectly blamed him for the death of their daughter on September 24th, 1818, shortly before they arrived at Naples. Mary's ensuing estrangement from him and his poor health whilst the couple were in Naples made him very depressed - even to the extent to which (as Newman Ivy White writes in his biography of Shelley) he tried to commit suicide. We can see that Shelley's feeling of isolation probably had a major effect on his mood - it is evident in Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples he expresses this through the first person and relationship - or lack thereof - with others around him. Contrastingly, in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge explores the theme of isolation through the Mariner's physical separation from civilisation and others, when his crewmates die. At points he is surrounded by them - but their spirits rather than them being actually alive, so arguably he is alone for the majority of the poem.

His isolation is perhaps heightened by the fact that he is essentially the cause of his own loneliness - by shooting the albatross, his crewmates suffer for his crime, dying and leaving him with their corpses - 'alone on a wide wide sea'. The repetition of 'wide' suggests how small the Mariner feels compared to the expanse of ocean around his ship, and how now that the souls of his crewmates have 'passed [him] by,/Like the whizz of [his] cross-bow' he feels the enormity of the 'wide wide sea'. The reference to the 'whizz of [his] cross-bow' perhaps suggests how shooting the albatross is constantly on his mind, and how he makes a link between the death of his crewmates and his ensuing isolation to the shooting of the albatross. This view of isolation is somewhat incongruous with the Romantic idea of the

latter - the Mariner has caused his own isolation by shooting an albatross who was doing no harm, an innocent creature, perhaps even symbolic of Christ due to the heavy religious undertones throughout the poem.

This contrasts with common Romantic ideas of isolation - that the Romantic poet is destined to be detached from society because of a 'higher understanding' above most people, that they have an ability to see beyond the routine of daily life and are more sensitive to nature and religion than everyone else. Coleridge's portrayal of isolation in *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples* is more similar to the canon of isolation within the Romantic era - bad things have happened to the poet to divide them from society, or they are simply more at peace in nature and away from the modern world they live in. Therefore, we can deduce that Shelley perhaps sees isolation as the fate of the Romantic poet to see the world clearly but miserably, rather than a choice, and Coleridge by presenting it in this way perhaps sees isolation as more of an eternal punishment for an evil committed.

However, although Shelley's poem suggests he is miserable in his isolation, he does not portray his loneliness in a negative way - he sees misery and bad luck - 'the cup being dealt' in another measure' as the cause of his isolation, rather than the latter being the cause of his sadness. For example, he describes solitude as being 'soft' - 'The city's voice itself, is soft like Solitude's'. Shelley uses a change in tone here by using a half rhyme and more syllables in the line to create a sense of discord - in a way isolating the line, reflecting his feeling that he cannot connect with nature or others

because of his misery. Nonetheless, solitude is personified and given a 'soft'
<https://assignbuster.com/isolation-in-the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner-and-stanzas-written-in-dejection-near-naples/>

voice, suggesting Shelley may find comfort in it – it may be like a refuge for the ‘troubled soul’ of a Romantic poet. This contrasts to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as the poet (Coleridge) is not present in the poem at all – it tells the story of the Mariner in ballad form and the Wedding Guest’s response, so we do not get Coleridge’s direct perspective at all. In addition, this poem was originally published anonymously because Coleridge wanted people to think it was a traditional story that had been told before, hence the use of archaic language. However, we can get a sense of Coleridge’s ideas about isolation, specifically relating to religion, through the language and ideas presented in the poem.

Interestingly, Coleridge had the idea of ‘five stages of prayer’ in his journals from 1795-97, which we can interpret the Mariner as going through at various points in the poem. He is only able to pray and achieve ‘the celestial delectation that follows ardent prayer’ (the fourth stage) after he has ‘blessed [the water-snakes] unaware’, gone through the ‘repentance and regret’ of the death of his crew mates and the ‘horrible solitude’. This similarity between the Mariner’s journey and the 5 stages of prayer suggests solitude as part of prayer, and therefore a religious experience and a driving force behind repentance and regret, then later the ability to achieve ‘self-annihilation – the soul entering the Holy of Holies’. This expression of solitude as part of religion, or how we understand religion means Coleridge may be suggesting that to truly connect with God through prayer one must isolate oneself or be isolated to do so. Shelley also explores the idea of isolation in death in the last stanza of *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples*. He suggests that ‘Some might lament that I were cold’ and repeats

this (' they might lament') later on, as though he perhaps hopes that people will be sad when he dies, but is not confident that they will. ' I am one/Whom men love not' shows how he feels he is disliked and shunned by others, and by referring to himself as ' one' implies he is a solitary person - that only he is ' one/Whom men love not'. This idea that he will be alone in death and not remembered fondly - or at all - evidently causes him some distress, as the last stanza uses somewhat clumsy syntax, unlike the rest of the poem. This loss of fluency in his writing could indicate he has only just thought of how he will be isolated in death - the verse does not seem to be planned - it is confused and suggests at his troubled mind. Contrastingly, Coleridge explores the value of company rather than recognition (after death) as something preferable to isolation.

Towards the end of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner he suggests that ' sweeter than the marriage-feast' is ' to walk together...With a goodly company' - in other words, that over any material comforts is the happiness of being with other people. He also suggests that religion can be something experienced and enjoyed as a community - ' Old men, and babes, and loving friends', conflicting his earlier idea that to pray one must be in solitude. And yet, the Mariner is destined to wander the earth alone, only interacting with people when he feels the ' woful agony' that forces him to tell his tale - he cannot experience the joy of the company of others. It could be argued that his lifelong isolation is the result of killing the albatross, but it is equally likely Coleridge was trying to present isolation as something which could happen to anyone if a tragedy such as the death of the Mariner's crewmates befell someone.

In conclusion, the most prominent way that isolation is portrayed in Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples is as a fate of the Romantic poet, which enables them to see the world clearly, yet in which misery thrives. Coleridge presents isolation as more of a punishment and misery itself in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, as the Mariner must be alone for the rest of his days, whilst Shelley, speaking biographically, refers to a relatively short period in his life - the time he spent in Naples.