

Human–Nature Relationship in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is one of the most powerful poetic explorations of the relationship between human beings and the natural world in English literature. Written at the dawn of the Romantic movement, the poem rejects Enlightenment ideas of human dominance over nature and instead presents nature as a living, sacred, and moral force. Through the Mariner's crime against the albatross and his subsequent suffering and spiritual awakening, Coleridge dramatizes the consequences of violating the natural order and affirms the necessity of humility, reverence, and love in humanity's relationship with nature.

Nature as a Living and Sacred Presence

From the opening sections of the poem, nature is not depicted as inert matter but as a living presence imbued with spiritual significance. The icy Antarctic landscape is animated and mysterious:

“The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around.”

The repetition emphasizes nature's overwhelming power and autonomy. Nature dominates human life rather than serving it. This aligns with the Romantic belief that nature possesses its own spirit and moral authority.

The albatross, which appears amid the hostile ice, functions as a benevolent natural agent. The sailors welcome it warmly:

“As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.”

By associating the bird with Christian symbolism, Coleridge suggests that nature is closely linked to the divine. The harmonious relationship between humans and nature is evident when the albatross brings favorable winds, guiding the ship safely forward. Nature, when respected, acts as a nurturing force.

Human Arrogance and the Violation of Nature

This harmony is violently disrupted when the Mariner shoots the albatross:

“With my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS.”

The act is sudden, motiveless, and shocking. Coleridge offers no rational explanation, emphasizing human arrogance and thoughtlessness toward nature. The Mariner's action symbolizes humanity's tendency to exploit or destroy nature without considering moral or ecological consequences.

Initially, the crew vacillates in their judgment, revealing collective moral confusion. However, when nature turns hostile—winds cease and the ship is trapped under the burning sun—the sailors realize their dependence on the natural world:

“Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
'Twas sad as sad could be.”

The becalmed sea becomes an image of nature's withdrawal of cooperation. Coleridge implies that when humans violate nature, they lose its sustaining support.

Nature as a Moral and Punitive Force

After the killing of the albatross, nature transforms from a friendly presence into a punitive power. The once-life-giving sea becomes oppressive and grotesque:

“The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!”

This corruption of the natural world reflects moral disorder. Nature mirrors the Mariner's sin, reinforcing the idea that human actions have cosmic consequences. The image of “slimy things” crawling on the sea challenges human assumptions of superiority and aesthetic judgment.

The sailors' decision to hang the dead albatross around the Mariner's neck symbolizes nature's moral judgment:

“Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.”

Nature here becomes a site of ethical reckoning. The albatross, once a symbol of harmony, now stands as a reminder of human guilt and responsibility.

Alienation from Nature and the Self

As punishment intensifies, the Mariner becomes profoundly alienated from the natural world. Though surrounded by water, he cannot drink:

“Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.”

This paradox encapsulates humanity's estrangement from nature. Nature no longer nurtures but withholds sustenance. The Mariner's suffering suggests that domination over nature leads not to mastery but to isolation and despair.

The death of the crew further underscores this alienation. Left alone on the vast sea, the Mariner confronts the terrifying indifference of nature when harmony is broken:

“Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!”

This moment reflects Romantic anxiety about human insignificance in the face of nature’s immensity.

Reconciliation Through Reverence and Love

The turning point in the poem occurs when the Mariner learns to see beauty and value in all forms of life, even those he once despised. Observing the water-snakes, he experiences a spontaneous moment of reverence:

“O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare.”

This moment marks a shift from alienation to connection. Importantly, the Mariner blesses the creatures “unaware,” indicating that true harmony with nature arises from instinctive love rather than self-serving intention.

Immediately, the natural order begins to restore itself:

“The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.”

Nature responds positively to the Mariner’s changed attitude. Coleridge suggests that reconciliation with nature requires humility and recognition of the intrinsic worth of all life forms.

Nature, God, and Moral Unity

Coleridge’s vision of the human–nature relationship is deeply spiritual. Nature is portrayed as an extension of divine presence, not separate from God. This is articulated explicitly in the poem’s moral conclusion:

“He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.”

Love for nature becomes a form of prayer. The Mariner’s redemption is possible only when he learns to respect nature as sacred, reinforcing the Romantic idea of the unity of God, humanity, and the natural world.

The Mariner’s lifelong compulsion to tell his tale further emphasizes the ethical responsibility humans bear toward nature. His story serves as a warning against ecological arrogance and moral blindness.

Conclusion

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge presents the human–nature relationship as one governed by moral law rather than human will. Nature is a living, sacred force that nurtures when respected and punishes when violated. Through the Mariner’s journey from reckless destruction to reverent understanding, the poem articulates a Romantic ecological vision that remains profoundly relevant today. Coleridge ultimately argues that human survival—spiritual as well as physical—depends upon humility, empathy, and love toward all forms of life. The poem stands as an enduring reminder that harmony with nature is not optional but essential to moral and existential well-being.