PSYCHOLOGICAL PROJECTION IN
THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

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The Romantic poets were intensely concerned with the idea of the individual man as separated, alone, isolated, even alienated—if not from his god, at least from his society and his organic environment. This profound sense of spiritual isolation is evident in much Romantic poetry, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of the poets who most frequently concerns himself with this theme.

In The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge associates the concepts of isolation and sin. He does this by placing his ideas about isolation and sin into the frame of the archetypal myth of spiritual rebirth. On this allegorical level, man, who is initially innocent, becomes separated from the rest of the world through an act of evil. Eventually, he regains a new understanding of his place in the universe and a unity with it. Coleridge depends specifically upon the Christian myth or tradition of the fortunate fall, and his choice of symbols and images points directly to this ethic. This does not, however, keep him from including magical signs or pagan images to show the isolation of man.

On the individual level, one man, the Ancient Mariner, moves through three stages in his spiritual life: innocence, isolation and reunity with the universe. To demonstrate this, Coleridge uses the technique of psychological movement, a projection or externalization of the Mariner’s state of mind. For this externalization, Coleridge, with a typically Romantic interest in the sensory perceptions, concentrates heavily on light—images. In this paper I wish to trace these light—images (and their associate eye—images) which suggest the psychological progression within the poem and to show that Coleridge’s use of light—imagery is consistent throughout The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.
Coleridge’s first use of eye—imagery is in the first stanza. As suggested above, these images sometimes relate to the Christian ethic, but sometimes have magical implications. The “glittering eye” of the Ancient Mariner is a frequently repeated phrase and seems to denote not just the inner spiritual knowledge and feverish need to impart it to those in spiritual danger, but also is reminiscent of the pagan concept of the “evil eye” which contains hypnotic powers. “He holds him with his glittering eye... The Mariner hath his will” 1/. This reference to the “glittering” and “bright—eyed” appearance of the Mariner prepares the way for the tale to come by hinting at the supernatural portent of the Mariner’s story. We will also find this specific reference mentioned throughout the story, and thus it serves as a unifying device.

The second way in which the eye—references prepare us for the tale is in the understanding of the eye as a sensory organ, able to perceive light. The sun and the moon are the two main recurring images throughout the poem, and, as such, these light sources will be my main concern. The way in which the Mariner perceives the sun and moon and interprets their appearance during his experience is central to the theme of the three stages of his development: his interpretations of the sun and moon demonstrate his psychological development. As Irving Babbitt comments, “the soul is a state of the landscape and the landscape a state of the soul” 2/.

Both Robert Penn Warren and George Herbert Clarke have written articles which deal with the sun and moon imagery in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Mr. Warren suggests that the sun is the symbol of reason or understanding, the mere reflective faculty. The moon, on the other hand, which Warren associates with the Albatross, is the symbol of creativity, imagination, and as such a beneficent object. He proceeds to explain that the loss of the creative faculty and the eventual regaining of it is the secondary theme of the poem 3/. I agree with Mr. Warren’s proposal of the imaginative faculty being a possible secondary theme; however, he does not satisfactorily explain the situations in which the sun appears in a friendly nature and those in which the moon is present during the Mariner’s agonizing experience.

George Herbert Clarke suggests another possible meaning of the sun and moon, but he too runs into the problem of trying to explain the dual characters of the sun and moon. Mr. Clarke suggests that the sun is the symbol of the punitive side of God, stern, masculine and just 4/. While this idea is partially justified, it is oversimplified. It is after all the Mariner—narrator who sees the sun as a punitive force after his crime, and the sun can also be “bright” and benevolent, depending upon the Mariner’s state of mind. Nor, as Clarke suggests, is the moon always a gentle and forgiving force.

The ambivalent view of the sun and moon can, however, be explained by the fact that it is the narrator who interprets their nature. It must be remembered that the tale is told by the Mariner, not the poet. As his attitude or psychological state changes, so do the objects of nature, particularly the sun and moon. And this psychological approach, I believe, resolves the problem of the consistency of the light—images that Clarke and Warren fail to adequately account for.

The first object which the Mariner mentions after leaving the kirk (Christian guidance), the hill (familiar nature) and the lighthouse (man’s guidance for his fellow man) is the sun. The sun is described as a masculine personification and is endowed with god—like powers by the Mariner; while the moon, appearing later, is of a female nature. Because the Mariner and his fellow shipmates embark upon this new adventure in a merry mood, the sun “shone bright” (42). And the emphasis on the rising and setting of the sun places the Mariner in an ordered, familiar and consequently comfortable universe. Coleridge, of course, is also accurate in his literal description of the sun in order to indicate the direction of the ship and geographical points which are important to the tale. “The Sun came up upon the left./Out of the sea came he! /And he shone bright, and on the right/Went down into the sea,” (42) indicates a southern direction; and “Higher and
higher every day /Till over the mast at noon/”, informs us of the crossing of the equator. Later the direction of the ship will change with a change in the Mariner’s character, and the equator will be the scene of his hell.

In direct contrast to the cheerful scene at the beginning is the scene after the Mariner crosses the equator into unfamiliar surroundings: here the tone changes sharply. In contrast to his previous gaiety, he is now filled with the dual feelings of awe and terror. The sun is no longer in its rightful position, and all the light in this scene is indirect, reflected sheens and mists. “And now there came both mist and snow... And through the drifts the snowy cliffs/Did send a dismal sheen” (43). Yet, at the same time there is an attractiveness about this isolated, unfamiliar region as demonstrated by the beauty of the “ice mastagh, came floating by/As green as emerald” (43). For the Mariner both the beauty and the terror of this region are produced by its complete isolation from man, nature and even God. This is carefully emphasized by the use of repetition and anastrophe: “Nor shapes of men nor beasts we knew—/The ice was all between. The ice was here, the ice was there,/The ice was all around” (43). This scene will later be echoed when the Mariner finds himself “Alone, alone, all, all, alone,/Alone on a wide wide sea! ”(49). The Mariner has started his process of isolation which will culminate in the complete rejection of man, God and nature, as symbolized by the Albatross.

The relief from this separateness is provided by the Albatross which comes through the fog to the sailors and is greeted with great rejoicing by them. So glad are they to see this living creature that “as if it had been a Christian soul/We hailed it in God’s name” (44). Coleridge clearly indicates the bird is more than a friendly representative of nature, but is to be taken as a living being with a human—like soul. The sacredness of its life is emphasized by the fact that it “perched for vespers nine” (44) and forms a brotherhood with the crew as “It ate the food it ne’er had eat” (44). Particularly, it is the Mariner with whom it forms a bond. With this friendly representative of Christianity, nature and mankind to guide him, the Mariner notices the beauty and softness of nature. “Whiles all the night, through fog—smoke white/Glimmered the white Moon—shine” (44). With this first appearance of the moon, the Mariner’s fear of the mist or cloud seems dispelled. The moon, like the Albatross, seems to the Mariner to break through the fog to guide and encourage. After this gentle picture of the moonlight comes the climactic last stanza of Part I, which includes the shooting of the Albatross. The Mariner, with no justified motive, in his pride completes his rejection of all the universe by killing a living creature; and so he turns inward, into a solipsistic state. And the line “Why look’st thou so?” (44) reminds us of the “glittering”, “feverish” eye of the Mariner which is a result of his experience.

With the announcement of the crime “With my cross—bow/I shot the ALBATROSS”, (44) comes a direct and dramatic turn in the poem. “The Sun now rose upon the right:/ Out of the sea came he” (44). Immediately, the soft flow of the moon is dispelled and the sun appears as the light source. The literal description of the sun indicates a turn in the ship’s direction—northward—and thus symbolizes a turn in the Mariner’s spiritual state. This is structurally reinforced by lines 87—90 which echo the previous lines 71—74, but this time “no sweet bird did follow” (45). The “sweet” guide is no longer there to lead the Mariner back to his familiar surroundings. Once the crime has been committed, the Mariner cannot achieve again his state of spiritual innocence or psychological peace. As yet, however, the Mariner feels no remorse for his action, and the elements of nature are not immediately threatening.

The only indication of the wrongness of the act is the outcry of his fellow shipmates who choose to identify the bird with the needed breeze. Only after “Nor dim nor red, like God’s own head/The glorious Sun upris” (45) do they pragmatically side with the Mariner. To them the sun’s rising seems a good omen as indicated by the word “glorious”. The word “red” here has significance as it emphasizes the brightness of the
sun. Later we will see the shade of red change in direct relationship to the Mariner’s feelings. The Mariner’s shipmates make themselves accomplices to the crime by justifying the killing in terms of their own good. They, too, have committed the sin of pride, the rejection of all but their own desires; and the sun image here reinforces this concept of pride. As Robert Penn Warren suggests, here the sun “is the light of practical convenience, it is the light in which pride preens itself”; 5/it is the sun which lights the Mariner’s way to the “silent sea”, the solipsistic world. It is now that the agonizing experience is to begin for the Mariner. Isolation, then, is not so much the result of sin, but rather the state of sin. It is after the Mariner’s prideful action of rejection that he must learn the anguish of this chosen alienation. In his solipsistic world he will find spiritual and psychological remorse.

In lines 103–105 the mood of the sailor’s joy is emphasized by the freedom of movement: “The furrow followed free;/We were the first that ever burst/into that silent sea” (45). Their first reaction to the freedom from obligation is one of happiness. This mood, however, is quickly changed to one of complete stillness—lack of both motion and noise; the horror of loneliness has started. And as the Mariner’s depression starts, the sun now appears to him in the role of an avenging force, and the word “bloody” replaces the word “red” as the color of the sun. “Bloody” is certainly an indication that the Mariner has started to reflect upon his bloody killing of the Albatross. “All in a hot and copper sky./The bloody Sun, at noon./Right up above the mast did stand./No bigger than the Moon” (45). The Mariner is at the equator; and the hell of the unreal, the unfamiliar world which the Mariner is building for himself is reinforced by the image of the ship “As idle as a painted ship/Upon a painted ocean” (45). The isolation which the Mariner asks for in his wanton rejection of a simple social union will prove to be its own punishment; and the Mariner’s feeling of isolation and its accompanying rejection is shown by his description of “Water, water, every where./And all the boards did shrink./Water, water, every where./Nor any drop to drink.” (45–46). The boards of the ship instead of being swelled by water, contract; and the unfamiliar world of the Mariner is completely opposite to the real one.

In his despair, the Mariner sees all the creatures of the sea as disgusting and “slimy”. And while the description of the sea at this time could be a literal one, the emphasis on its fire—like colors presents a paradox—water now seems to be fire. Certainly this description reminds us of Dante’s hell: in this case, the hell which the Mariner is going through is a psychological one. He sees “The death—fires danced at night/The water, like a witch’s oils./Burnt green, and blue and white” (46).

In this hell the men are unable to communicate with their voices, and so we have a return to the eye—imagery. Their eyes with “evil looks” cast their accusations at the Ancient Mariner. Unable to speak or move, only stare, the tone of sapped energy is conveyed by their glazed and weary eyes: “There passed a weary time, Each throat/Was parched, and glazed each eye./A weary time! a weary time!/How glazed each weary eye” (46). We cannot help but remember the previous reference to the “glittering” and “bright” eyes of the Mariner. Here the sailors lack any spiritual insight, and their eyes reflect this lack of inner light. Later, the Mariner has acquired spiritual knowledge through his experience, and his eye “gliters” with this knowledge. The glittering eye then indicates not only the achievement of a new innocence or goodness, but also the retention of the knowledge of the terrible potential of mankind.

This “weary eye” imagery is placed in a repetitive pattern which slows down the rhythm and thus reinforces the idea of the Mariner’s lethargy. The rhythm speeds up startlingly in lines 149–159 as the Mariner sights a shape in the distance. In his state of hopelessness and depression, a sudden hope brings almost overwhelming joy. But as the nature of the craft is distinguished, horror replaces his lethargy; and the sun becomes prominent again. By this time the sun is sinking in the west, and night is coming. The
literal description is of the sea “a—flame” from the sun’s light which prepares a hell—like environment for the spectre ship. The line “rested the broad bright Sun” (47) is followed dramatically with “When that strange shape drove suddenly/Betwixt us and the Sun” (47). In the next three stanzas this picture is mentioned three times: “And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,... Are those her sails that glance in the Sun,... Are those her ribs through which the Sun/Did peer, as through a grate?” (47—48). The death ship, which carries the personification of Life—in—Death who claims the Mariner, represents the Mariner’s unreal, distorted universe which has arisen out of his solipsistic, self—centered view; and it symbolizes to him his spiritually dead soul. Up to this point many objects, such as the Albatross, sun, moon, have mystical qualities but all of them are also part of the real world. The ship, however, is couched entirely in terms of spectres, ghosts, which provides the clue to its existing only in the unreal world of the Mariner. This world has now become a prison for him; his guilt interposes itself like bars between him and nature: “And straight the Sun was flecked with bars” (48).

As the bark leaves with the Mariner’s fate sealed, “the Sun’s rim dips; the stars rush out/At one stride comes the dark... We listened and looked sideways up!” (48). The Mariner’s spiritual world is chaotic; and psychologically he projects this into the physical universe as the sun dips, stars rush and night presses in on him. In this dark night of the soul, we are given the brilliant image of the steersman’s gleaming white face. This recalls the appearance of the spectral Life—in—Death who is described just previously as being “white as leprosy” (48). This association serves to show that the Mariner’s own ship, his own sinful soul, as he now conceives it, is in the hands of a diseased and corrupt steersman because the Mariner himself committed an evil act. The psychological projection of his present spiritual state is superimposed by him on the real world, serving to give to this real world characteristics identical with his own corrupt spiritual world.

When the moon appears, it is waning. The Mariner connects this waning moon to his ship—mates and it seems to represent their waning lives. It is in the moonlight that the two hundred men die as they curse the Mariner with their eyes. Here the moon is not a gentle figure but the light present at men’s deaths. And the moon continues to shine while the Mariner receives their curse, which pulls us back to the “glittering”, “feverish” eye of the Mariner. To make sure that we remember this last relationship, the Wedding—Guest breaks in and mentions his fear of the Mariner’s “glittering eye”. Here we see that the moon is not a sympathetic figure as suggested by Warren and Clarke, but that Coleridge changes its nature to fit the outlook of the Mariner.

The Mariner is now fully cognisant of this physical and social abandonment. “Alone, alone, all, all alone,/Alone on a wide wide sea! / And never a saint took pity on/My soul in agony”. (49) All that is left, centrally, is oneself; and this now proves disgusting to him as we see when he mentally connects himself with the “slimy” creatures of the deep. “The many men, so beautiful! / And they all dead did lie:/ And a thousand thousand slimy things/Lived on; and so did I.” (49) The Mariner looks to the rotting sea (nature), the dead men (humanity) and heaven (God), but none of the three can give him consolation. Not only his disgust, but his guilt feelings make him unable to call on help: “A wicked whisper came, and made/My heart as dry as dust”. (50) His state of depression is now at its lowest point, but he cannot yet receive relief for he is still committing the sin of pride, for in his self—pitv he wishes to die: “And yet I could not die” (50). Even the dead men seem to be in a better state than he. At this lowest ebb, we again get the eye—imagery. The weariness of this situation, emphasized by the repetition of the words
sky and sea, sea and sky, conveys the feeling that both sea and sky, the entire world, are a weight upon his weary eyes. In addition to this is the weight of the curse in the eyes of the dead men which he must bear for seven days. The seven days of pain seem to be the final stage of the Mariner’s depression and self-pity and, as such, the beginning of the creation of a new world or life for him. He can sink no lower, and so in his deepest state of depression, in his spiritual death, is paradoxically the beginning of a more hopeful state of mind and a spiritual rebirth.

After this the scene of nature changes immediately. The Mariner watches the moon moving in the sky—moving as he cannot—and he thinks of her as softly ascending, going upwards. But most important he notices that the moon is accompanied by two stars and is not alone as the Mariner is. The Mariner yearns after the moon and stars because he sees them as a sign of the social unity which he now wishes for. The moon floods the sea with its gentle light, and only the shadow of the ship remains “still and awful red” (50–51).

As he watches the moonlight on the water, he notices the sea creatures who are bathed in the “shining white/And when they reared, the effish light/Fell off in hoary flakes” (51). And within the shadow of the ship they are “Blue, glossy green, and velvet black/They coiled and swam; and every track/Was a flash of golden fire./O happy living things! no tongue/Their beauty might declare:/A spring of love gushed from my heart./And I blessed them unaware” (51). As the Mariner’s mind turns from himself, the water snakes seem transfigured from “slimy things” to beautiful things. And one of the reasons they are beautiful is simply that they are living; the Mariner no longer wishes for death but life. The diction changes sharply here, and we have a sensuous quality in the description of the animals—glossy green, velvet black, golden fire. This, then, is the second dramatic climax of the poem; and it is the second major change in the spiritual life and in the psychological state of the Mariner. At the same time that the Mariner acknowledges the importance of the water creatures, he also denies his solipsistic, alienated, pride-centered world. Because he now loves all living creatures, all of nature appears beautiful to him. As the Mariner turns outside himself, as hope begins to be born, as his depression starts to lift, simultaneously his guilt leaves him and he is able to pray.

Relief comes in the form of sleep; and when the Mariner awakes, there is great movement in contrast to the Mariner’s previous motionlessness. As his spiritual life changes direction, entering the third stage, the objects of nature seem to conspire to help him. A roaring wind shakes the sails, “The upper air burst into life! /And a hundred fire—flags sheen,/To and fro they were hurried about! /And to and fro, and in and out,/The wan stars danced between” (52). The moon is on its side, and this time is accompanied by moving light—“the lightning fell with never a jag” (52). There is a definite psychological need for expiation, and this storm indicates the penance which the Mariner must now begin. It is beneath this wild light of moon and lightning that the dead men become invested by blessed spirits who help the Mariner toward his familiar harbor. The Mariner observes this transfiguration of the men just as he did that of the water snakes. When the day dawns, these spirits raise their voices in sweet sounds which the Mariner sees as traveling to the sun and then returning. The connection of the sun with the sweet sounds of the spirits indicates once again that the sun cannot be taken as a constant punitive force. Rather, here, it seems merciful, returning the sweetness to the Mariner.

The ship sails on smoothly with all the elements in accord, but one last punishment is required before the Mariner can completely cross the line to the third stage of regained innocence. The sun, for a moment, fixes the ship to the ocean; and so once more one of the light sources is connected with punishment. When the ship breaks through the boundary, the Mariner faints. During this swoon, the Mariner hears the voices of two spirits who recount, explain and foretell the experiences of the Mariner. These voices
seem to represent the Mariner’s ambivalent feeling toward himself. The first voice, in an accusing tone, retells the crime. But the second, in a gentle voice, tells of the penance the Mariner has done and will do; this voice also explains the supernatural motion of the ship which is symbolic of the movement toward spiritual rebirth. Particularly, this voice paints the picture of the moon and sea acting in gracious union to bring the Mariner home. “If [the sea] may know which way to go;/For [the moon] guides him smooth or grim./See, brother, see! how graciously/She looketh down on him” (55).

When the Mariner awakes, the stony eyes of the dead men glitter in the moonlight. As Mr. Warren suggests, this scene recalls two previous ones 6/. First, it recalls the earlier scene in which the moonlight illuminates the curse in the dead men’s eyes and reminds us that even the moon can seem stern, depending upon the Mariner’s state of mind. Secondly, it recalls the scene of the water snakes as the moonlight reveals their beauty; here, the moon seems a gentle force. Consequently, the dual character of the moon—punitive and forgiving, stern and gentle—is drawn together in one scene. First the curse is illuminated by the moon, then the moonlight seems to snap the curse, freeing the Mariner.

Soon afterwards, the Mariner spies the lighthouse, the kirk and the hill; all three aspects of his familiar world, man, God and nature, seem to welcome him. In his joy, the Mariner perceives the entire bay as bathed in the soft moonlight, including the hill, kirk and lighthouse. “The harbour—bay was clear as glass./So smoothly it was strewn! /And on the bay the moonlight lay./And the shadow of the Moon. The rock shone bright, the kirk no less./ That stands above the rock;/The moonlight steeped in stillness/The steady weathercock” (57). The Mariner then sees from the bay, white with moonlight, crimson shadows rising. The Mariner now sees the color red, previously described as “bloody”, “awful”, as a beautiful “crimson”. And as his eyes turn to the deck, he sees the seraphs, freed from their bodies, standing as brilliant lights. These lights guide the Hermit and the pilot to the Mariner. In this scene the lights of God, the angels, and the lights of nature, the moonlight, join together in their kindness to the Mariner. Spiritually, he is ready to rejoin the world, and to him the world seems to welcome him. The Hermit, like the Albatross, comes to guide the Mariner and also represents the church, nature and mankind for he is a holy man, he lives in the woods and “loves to talk to mariners” (50). Symbolically, the Mariner asks forgiveness from all three in the figure of the Hermit, for he has sinned against all three; and he receives forgiveness, though he must do penance. The Mariner has learned the value of love and has found a unity with his world.

As it began, the poem concludes with eye—imagery. At the very end we are reminded of “the Mariner, whose eye is bright” (61). While much eye—imagery appears throughout the poem, this particular image appears the most consistently and serves as a unifying device in two ways. First, the “glittering” eye of the Mariner reemphasizes the fact that he is in the third state of his spiritual development; that he has experienced the isolation and gained the resulting knowledge of the need for love and unity with the universe. It also emphasizes the psychological state of the Mariner’s mind; that he carries the burden of this knowledge and that the need to constantly confess his crime remains with him.

Secondly, the eye—imagery is concerned with the eye as a sensory organ. As such, it reminds us of what the Mariner has seen, and most important, the way in which the Mariner has perceived his universe. It is directly connected, then, to the light—images and the use that Coleridge has made of them, especially the pictures of the sun and moon. When the Mariner, through pride, builds himself a solipsistic world, the resulting depression and disgust are mirrored in the landscape. When the Mariner, through love, reunifies and identifies himself with the rest of the universe, his joy and relief are projected into his natural environment. If we remember that the description of the universe is a description as the Mariner perceives it, then the apparent conflict of the changing characteristics of nature—particularly the sun and moon—resolves itself.
FOOTNOTES

1) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Coleridge, ed. Richard Wilbur (New York, 1959), p. 42. In this paper all quotations followed by a page number will be from this text.


5) Penn Warren, p. 119.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED


