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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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## СОДРЖИНА CONTENTS

### *Јазик*

- Сашка Јовановска, Натка Алаџозовска**  
ЗАСТАПЕНОСТ НА ГРАМАТИЧКИТЕ ФОРМИ ВО  
УЧЕБНИКОТ WELCOME 2 ОД ЕЛИЗАБЕТ ГРЕЈ И  
ВИРѢИНИЈА ЕВАНС  
**Sashka Jovanovska, Natka Jankova Alagjovska**  
REPRESENTATION OF GRAMMAR FORMS IN THE  
TEXTBOOK WELCOME 2 BY ELIZABETH GRAY  
AND VIRGINIA EVANS ..... 9
- Марица Тасевска**  
ТРИТЕ ФАЗИ НА ЈАЗИЧНИОТ ИЗРАЗ  
**Marica Tasevska**  
THREE PHASES OF LANGUAGE EXPRESSION ..... 19

### *Култура*

- Марија Леонтиќ**  
ПРИДОНЕСОТ НА АРИФ СТАРОВА ЗА ПРОНАОЃАЊЕТО И  
ПРЕВЕДУВАЊЕТО НА БИТОЛСКИТЕ СИЦИЛИИ ОД  
ОСМАНЛИСКИОТ ПЕРИОД  
**Marija Leontik**  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARIF STAROVA FOR FINDING AND  
TRANSLATING THE BITOLA'S OTTOMAN REGISTERS  
FROM THE OTTOMAN PERIOD ..... 29
- Tatjana Vukelic**  
BLACK VERNACULAR TRADITION AND FOLKLORE ..... 45

### *Книжевност*

- Весна Кожинкова**  
БАЛКАНСКИОТ И МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ХРОНОТОП  
ВО СОВРЕМЕНАТА ПОСТКОЛОНИЈАЛНА КРИТИКА  
**Vesna Kozhinkova**  
THE BALKAN AND MACEDONIAN CHRONOTOPE  
IN MODERN POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM ..... 57
- Natalija Pop-Zarjeva, Krste Plev**  
COLERIDGE: THE WORLD AND THE MORAL OF  
THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER ..... 69



**Фатмине Вејсели**

УЛОГАТА НА СЕСТРАТА ВО СЕМЕЈНОТО РИВАЛСТВО ВО  
ДРАМАТА ЧИСТИЛИШТЕ ВО ИНГОЛШТАД  
ОД МАРИЛУИЗЕ ФЛАЈСЕР

**Fatmire Vejseli**

THE ROLE OF THE SISTER IN THE FAMILY RIVALRY IN  
THE DRAMA PURGATORY IN INGOLSTADT

BY MARILUISE FLEISER..... 79

**Мерал Шехаби-Весели, Лулјета Адили-Челику, Фатмине Вејсели**

КНИЖЕВНОТО ТВОРЕШТВО НА РУМИ КАКО ИНТЕРТЕКСТ  
НА ПОЕЗИЈАТА НА ФРАШЕРИ

**Meral Shehabi-Veseli, Luljeta Adili-Cheliku, Fatmire Vejseli**

RUMI'S LITERARY WORKS AS AN INTERTEXT

OF FRASHER'S POEMS..... 89



## COLERIDGE: THE WORLD AND THE MORAL OF *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER*

Natalija Pop Zarieva<sup>1</sup>, Krste Iliev<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Philology, University “Goce Delcev”- Stip  
[natalija.popzarieva@ugd.edu.mk](mailto:natalija.popzarieva@ugd.edu.mk)

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Philology, University “Goce Delcev”- Stip  
[krste.iliev@ugd.edu.mk](mailto:krste.iliev@ugd.edu.mk)

**Abstract:** This paper endeavours to analyse Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from two perspectives: the ambivalent world that Coleridge represented through the story of a sea voyage and the obscure moral or lack of moral in the story. On first sight, there are evident Christian connotations and veiled religious symbolism which produce the idea of a Christian view in which sin-penance-redemption govern the poem’s world. Although these pervade the storyline, on a deeper level they are challenged by a world that is governed by random evil forces, which come unexpectedly, and the punishment often outweighs the sin. We also probe into the theme of the power of individualism that Coleridge has depicted in the main character of the poem as well as the possibility to read this poem as a representation of the suffering of a guilt ridden survivor.

**Key words:** *Christian symbolism, sin-penance-redemption, moral, the problem of evil, guilt of survivor*

### Introduction

This poem has been attracting diverse criticism for more than two centuries. House comments that the “poem’s very richness at once tempts and defeats definiteness of interpretation” (House, 1969, p. 93). It may be read as just a story told by a weird old mariner, but it ends with the wedding-guest altered: physiologically and psychologically. Although the intermittent Christian interpretations suggested by the mariner and the gloss highlight their incongruence. Referring to the 1817 gloss, Warren (1958) recognizes a largely Christian outline of crime, punishment, penance, and redemption, blended with the imagination of the One Life. Bostetter and Magnuson, however, try to free the poem from the “traditional pattern of crime and punishment” (Magnuson, 1974, p. 56) by considering the depiction of disorder itself the vital point of the poem.

### **Religious symbolism**

There is repetitive use of Christian vocabulary as a sign of the Mariner's efforts to find his conventional orthodox values in the vastness of the unknown and facing supernatural destructive powers. He calls for help: "Heaven's Mother send us grace!" (line 177); is thankful to Mary for bringing him sleep "To Mary Queen the praise be given/ She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven," (lines 294-5); and, attributes his unaware blessing to the works of his saint: "Sure my kind saint took pity on me, / And I bless'd them unaware" (lines 286-7). Even the action of blessing is a typically religious act, drawn from his traditional value system. But, the ambiguity lies in the creatures that he blesses. The water snakes bear recognizable associations with the biblical serpent, which destroyed the ideal world of Adam and Eve by performing the same action of isolation. In Coleridge, they are probably introduced to point to religious interpretation of good and evil. By introducing the blessing of the snakes, the Mariner actually identifies with them, and by doing so, he forsakes the religious set of values which he had earlier followed as the snake in the Hebrew Bible is a deceptive animal that persuades Eve to defy God and is also identified as Satan in the Book of Revelation. Being under the power of the Life-in-Death figure, he recognizes evil forces in himself that oppose his previous worldview. He learns of the existence of evil forces and these forces become part of him. The blessing of the water snakes could be exactly that: recognition and acceptance of the evil. On the other hand, it is also a blessing eventually. Coleridge is creating this paradoxical moment when the good, in the form of a blessing, is combined with the evil that the serpent has symbolically represented from the very origins of Christianity. The blessing serves to facilitate the Mariner's penance and redemption, whereas the serpent image affirms the existence of evil and the Mariner's connection with it. He has not been assimilated by evil, but has witnessed the arbitrary actions of evil powers. Nevertheless, Coleridge also employs a variety of Christian symbols and allegories, which could be a result of the more religious tendencies in his later life. Their use in the poem is often, either overcome by the evil forces at work, or they act as a parody to religious rites, such as baptism, the Eucharist or the Christ figure. The boat with three rescuers is not a random choice in Coleridge, as the Wedding-guest whom the Mariner picks out of three, the Life-in-Death figure who "whistles thrice" when the dice is thrown and the Mariner's destiny is determined and his eternal suffering begins. The symbolism of the crossbow with its three ends associates the three sides of the cross. The Albatross has also been taken as a Christ figure, as Ronald Paulson points in "Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature", Coleridge conflates "the Ancient Mariner's sin against nature (inhospitality, etc.) with fallen humankind's evil treatment of Christ" (2007, p. 258). Robert Penn Warren has also pointed to the "symbolic transference from Christ to the albatross, from the slain Son of God to the slain creature of God" (1989, p. 362). In the poem, the albatross is referred to as "the pious bird" (Coleridge, Gloss 9), and for the sailors, who are trapped on the ship surrounded by ice, it means salvation and



mercy: it has come to guide the ship like the Son of God, and was killed. “Instead of the cross, the Albatross/ about my neck was hung” (lines 141-2) is an obvious parallel of the albatross with Christ, represented by the cross, a symbolic representation of the religion he professed. The death of the bird evokes the death of Christ, signifying that in killing a living thing without a possible explanation, we partake in the brutality which Jesus endured. An insignificant form of an unprovoked evil can also be noticed in the Wedding-Guest’s “inhospitable” direct reference to the Mariner as a “grey-beard loon” (Coleridge, line 11). Unkindness is not an act as severe as killing a living creature, but Dilworth Thomas states “it is on the same scale of diminishing love” (2007, p. 516). This makes the Mariner a Christ-like figure, as after his sin, he patiently endures the suffering, recalling the suffering and the atonement sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The parching heat, the intolerable thirst he is suffering, the judgment in the sailors’ eyes, and bearing the guilt make the Mariner a martyr, a parody of Christ’s crucifixion on the Cross. Hence, *The Rime* attributes both, the Ancient Mariner and the albatross, traits of Jesus figures in which the later represents the positive efficacy of redemption, as the bird dies for the sin and salvation of the Mariner, whereas, the Ancient Mariner represents the negative efficacy of redemption as he does not die, but continues to suffer eternally. The emblematic Christ figure treatment of the Mariner is imposed by the view of the dead body of the albatross hanging from the Mariner’s neck, which renders the Mariner’s body as a cross-like figure. The correlation of the Mariner and the albatross with the body of Jesus on the cross is remarkably illustrated in David Jones’s 1964 copper engraving of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. However, there isn’t any direct evidence in the text that Coleridge intended to represent the Mariner and the albatross as religious incarnations.

The isolation that the specter ships represents itself also brings isolation to the Mariner’s ship by separating him from the rest of the crew who is doomed to die. The situation resembles the vampire’s isolated status in society as this mythical creature lives next to humans but is feared, destroyed and not part of community. The Mariner is able to see the curse in the eyes of the sailors as he has done a hideous deed for which the demonic forces that have possessed them had been unleashed. This is a proof of the existence of inexplicable irrational forces and principles governing the unknown. A Christian God would not condemn the Mariner to such horrific destiny for a mere bird slaughter, nor would the crew who did not participate in the act, - but merely approved of it, as they esteemed that the bird had brought them “mist and snow” (line 134) - deserve such terrible and sudden death. The traditional earthly mores would not convict two hundred men with death for approving an unaware killing of a bird. This newly acquainted world threatens to diminish the system of values that was part of the Mariner’s world so far.

Parallel to the sin—suffering—redemption theme, Coleridge seems to be offering a discussion of the Problem of Evil. In a note from January 11, 1805, Coleridge writes, “It is the most instructive part of my Life the fact, that I have been always

prayed on some dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequences of some dread or other in my mind from fear of Pain, or Shame, not from prospect of pleasure.” (Coleridge’s *Notebooks: A Selection*, 2002, p. 76) He posits that the evil that is engendered from Original Sin of our fear of the evils in the world and that sometimes evil comes unexplained and unexpectedly. The basis for explanation of Coleridge’s idea of the origins of evil is his remark to Anna Barbauld’s comment on the lack of a moral in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. His reply was that “the poem had too much: It ought to have no more moral than the Arabian Night’s tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells inside, and lo! A genie starts up, and says he must kill the aforesaid merchant, because one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son.” (*English Romantic Writers*, 1995, p. 520) This analogue, however, explains more the idea of sin, than the lack of a moral in his poem. The comment focuses on a random act that is followed by punishment that outweighs the severity of the act.

The difficulty of making meaning of the moral that we have to deal with in order to gain complete understanding of the poem is perhaps rooted in the fact that the poem obscurely challenges the possibility of the existence of universal moral categories. The verse could be considered as the Mariner’s struggle to understand his experience with the moral values that are incorporated in him. His inability to make any sense actually refers to the general non-existence of universal rules outside human community. It could be that the poem’s idea lies in presenting the main character’s inability to gain complete understanding of its moral sense. Even seen in Christian terms as a sinful soul, the Mariner is evidently deprived of complete understanding of the roots of his condition, as are we. The final statement, “the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all,” (line 616-17) appears to have no reference to his experience. If it were a loving God, it is unclear why he would make the Mariner suffer eternal punishment for what is only a minor offense. Coleridge unconvincingly includes the final moral, which does not explain the Mariner’s horrific experience. The moral leaves the poem’s idea obscure and without unity, mirroring the character’s and the readers’ inability to make sense of the world applying universal moral concepts.

Another less noticed confusing aspect of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is the fact that the fate of the Mariner and two hundred men is determined by the throw of dice. The fate of so many people on the ship is determined by the most arbitrary act like a dice game. This fact robs the poem of any logical, rational or moral interpretation as well. It also reminds of the most famous dicing in human history—the Roman soldiers’ dice for the robes of Christ. In essence, they were Christ’s enemy sentencing him to death for his preaching ideology. Their dicing game was for pure materialistic reasons—the possession of goods. However, the paradox of this act is that they didn’t know what they were doing and what this could mean one day, that by possessing Christ’s relics they unconsciously participate in the perpetuation of Christ’s story and facilitate its present day endurance. According to the Bible (Luke

23:34), Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. And they divided up His garments by casting lots.” The soldiers’ oblivious act is parallel to the Mariner’s actions: he killed a bird, did a small unaware act, but vast events followed this deed; he blessed the snakes, once again unconsciously, and his burden was released. Coleridge seems to be aiming at the fact that, sometimes, small things turn out to bring great consequences. A casual act, which brings significant results—this is something Coleridge has clearly put into play. This biblical reference does not serve to support the argument of the Mariner’s vampiric nature, but it poses light on the occurrence of events in life in which, as in the case of the Mariner, sometimes small unaware acts can have grave outcomes. The dicing element also suggests a universe where logic and human moral system do not rule, but random and irrational forces which determine life and death, more precisely a simultaneous state of life and death.

### **Evil powers and the guilt of the survivor**

The lack of moral significance opens the gate for psychological interpretation of the effects of the disturbing powers the Mariner is exposed to. It is the existing arbitrariness that imposes the poem’s reading as a major traumatic disruption in the Mariner’s personality, the reason of which is attesting of the sudden death of his shipmates, according to David S. Miall (“The Predicament of ‘The Ancient Mariner’”, 1984). His reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* takes into account Robert Lifton’s “Life in Death: Survivors of Hiroshima”, arguing that it is the death of the sailors, not the encounter with Life-in-Death which is the traumatic experience for the Mariner. He has undergone “what may be called the survivor’s ‘death spell,’” (Lifton as cited in David Miall, p. 646). Lifton has explored the traumatic effects of the Hiroshima atomic bomb on the survivors, which corresponds to Coleridge’s depiction of the Mariner after the experience on sea. Such a devastating encounter with collective death produces a “psychic closing-off” (p. 646) in the survivors usually accompanied with an unjustified sense of guilt because they have survived by considering themselves unworthy or merely being lucky. The reason for the Mariner’s closing-off is the curse he saw in the dead men’s eyes: he remained alive while all the others perished. His self-loathing is clear when he compares his existence with the disgusting sea creatures: “A thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I” (lines 239-40). His realization of the rotting sea beneath with the slimy creatures, points to himself, his inner state, but as his abilities are locked inside him and he is in a stasis, he is unable to pray. Furthermore, his psychological fixedness as a result of the guilt about the death of his crew is supported with the fixed image of the motionless ship: “As idle as a painted ship/ Upon a painted ocean” (lines 117-18), as if it is a painted picture. The Mariner is entrapped in a psychological state which does not seem to offer possibilities of getaway. Life-in-death is the proper representation for the condition he is caught in.

However, as this poem suggests, the Mariner's condition is not death, but resembles death. It is a state more horrific than death itself, in which life is interrupted with eternal suffering. While the souls of the Mariner's shipmates move "to bliss or woe," (line 221) he is stuck in a liminal condition. The lines describing the Life-in-Death figure: "She is far liker Death than he; / Her flesh makes the still air cold" (1800 Edition, lines 189-90) represent the paradox of living a life in death being worse than death itself. But, the Mariner's life-in-death state of existing also resonates human life stained by the Original sin, which we don't understand and are not able to save ourselves except through God.

As this analysis has, hopefully, proved, the source of the Mariner's distress is his guilt over the death of his shipmates, accompanied with the inability to experience death. The evil powers to which the Mariner is subjected to have a deep effect on him, leaving him psychologically maimed, and the tale offers no complete recovery for him, as he doesn't seem to actually understand the whole meaning of his experience. As Andrew Goodspeed ("The Curse in a Dead Man's Eye: Sight and Vision in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'"), points:

The Mariner in fact is groping towards understanding, and attempting to comprehend his suffering, yet does not fully understand it. Instead of teaching a lucid lesson about fate and guilt, he relates a powerful tale of suffering without drawing a clear conclusion." (2017, p. 209)

Having seen and experienced the arbitrariness of evil powers, evil becomes integral. Not in a sense that the Mariner becomes an entirely diabolical character, but more as a character who has seen the world from a different perspective which has changed him in a negative way. Like the Hiroshima or the Holocaust survivors, who live on, but are never what they used to be. They have felt the overwhelming power of evil, which has destroyed part of them and left a dark patch on their souls. Their story probably has a similar effect on the listeners as the Mariner's story has on the Hermit and Wedding-Guest. It is a story of darkness, diabolical forces and massive destruction without any logic or consequences that match the survivor's or the victims' crimes, like the Mariner's crime and the sailors' crimeless but terrible fate. Learning about the dark side of humans and the arbitrariness of evil, cannot but make people sad like the Wedding-Guest at the end. Between the Mariner and his listeners, there is not only knowledge transfer, but also energy transference. Although this information transmitted between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest is never revealed to the readers, it is a fact that the Wedding-Guest comes out changed after hearing the strange tale. Hearing a horrendous life story is likely to evoke negative feelings, as a result of the negative energy transference and the fear of the pending evil. As the Mariner is aware of the lurking evil behind us:

Like one that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,

And having once turn'd round, walks on,  
And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread. (lines 446-51)

His psyche is struggling to establish the causes for the terrible experience, the death of his shipmates, although he, as well as we are never sure whether it was the killing of the bird, an incident of pure chance or something else. In the struggle to find meaning in the world of arbitrary forces, the Mariner's permanent feeling is that of guilt. The guilt of the survivor, and undeniably for him—also the guilt of the criminal. His convulsions in agony are attempts to tell his tale, and for an interim to become relieved from the pangs of guilty feeling. The reading of the text as a traumatic experience of the Mariner obligates the mention of some psychoanalytic criticism and trauma theory, as well as the work of Primo Levi (1984). As one of the most creative writers of Auschwitz survivors, Levi distinctly recognizes within himself the Mariner's compulsion to repeat his tale or, as Coleridge's Mariner needs to be "shriven". The following is an excerpt from Levi's "Periodic Table":

The things I had seen and suffered were burning inside of me; I felt closer to the dead than the living, and felt guilty at being a man, because men had built Auschwitz, and Auschwitz had gulped down millions of human beings, and many of my friends, and a woman who was dear to my heart. It seemed to me that I would be purified if I told its story, and I felt like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who waylays on the street the wedding guests going to the feast, inflicting on them the story of his misfortune.

(1984, p. 151)

The Mariner's attempt to be "shriven" or "purified" is not a successful one, as it requires other processes: "testimony and integration, not confession and absolution", according to Ribkoff and Ingis ("Post-Traumatic Parataxis and the Search for a "Survivor by Proxy" in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", 2011). Judith Herman, in her "Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror" (1992), designates that the "survivor seeks not absolution [from others], but fairness, compassion, and the willingness to share the guilty knowledge of what happens to people in extremity" (1992, p. 69). She further explains, "The goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism" (1992, p. 181).

As previously stated, the Mariner's confession to the Hermit does not bring him absolution. Having in mind the negative responses of the Pilot and Pilot's Boy, as well as the Hermit's questioning the Mariner's nature, it is rather unlikely that the Mariner receives absolution from the character who represents religion. It is also

doubtful whether the Mariner's tale meets any compassion on the side of the listeners. We are definite about this with reference to the Hermit, but the Wedding-Guest has an ambiguous treatment by the author. We have evidenced on many occasions his reluctance to hear the Mariner's story, as well as certain unwillingness to be kept away from the festive ceremony. He stays only because he is in a way transfixed by the Mariner's "glittering eye" and because "He holds him with his skinny hand" (line 9). He expresses his impatience at having to hear the strange tale, "The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast, / For he heard the loud bassoon, (line 31-2) since it was the festivity that he wanted to be at. In addition, his incredulous attitude about the Mariner's tale is clearly depicted on many occasions. He refers to the Mariner as a "grey-beard loon," (line 11) which explains his treatment of the Mariner as a crazy old man who arouses fear:

I fear thee, ancient Mariner!  
I fear thy skinny hand!  
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,  
As is the ribb'd sea-sand.  
I fear thee and thy glittering eye,  
And thy skinny hand so brown. (lines 224-29)

On hearing the horrible story of the Mariner, there seems to be no trace of compassion on the part of the Wedding-Guest, which will enable the psychological return from the traumatic experience for the Mariner.

If we consider him as a character who suffers post-traumatic effect, the Mariner's tortured soul also needs integration into normal life. The end of the poem represents the Mariner as standing alone with his listener and watching from a distance the merry people celebrating. His preference to go to church and pray, again points to his choice for solitary life, as is his eternal curse to travel lonely from land to land and tell his story. The Mariner is deprived of integration in the community he used to belong; his return home is only physical and superficial. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the complete recovery of the Mariner's "soul in agony" does not take place as he does not go through the processes of compassion and integration, which is why at the end he is left to wander the world and compulsively articulate his story, and relive the experience in an effort to alleviate the pain. While doing that he "sucks" the energy of his listeners, enervating them and turning them into less happy people, like the work of the vampire.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that Coleridge achieves to attribute intrinsic vagueness to the poem by using devices that tend to enclose it: as a story within a story, religious understanding of events by the mariner himself and, after 1817, the gloss, the poem



displays intense open-endedness. While it undoubtedly appropriates Christian language, it turns to be inconsistent with the Christian doctrine. While the primary theme of the poem remains the sacramental vision, Coleridge's representation of the Mariner's experience in the poem offers a universe that is reflection not of logical beliefs but of unreasonable fears and feelings of guilt. The author has painted the kind of cosmos which his own life experiences could have suggested to him. His intrinsic fear of frightful consequences felt from a young age, involved a number of sinful acts, which eventually led him to opium addiction. The poet has poured himself so much into the poem, contained in Leslie Stephen's idea that the "germ of all Coleridge's utterances may be found—by a little ingenuity—in 'The Ancient Mariner'" (Stephen, 1909, p. 335). As a descriptive medium of the author's thought, it is evidently multivalent and defies the possibility of a single true interpretation.

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