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## The Echo of a Century: Coleridge's Perception of Nature in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Modern Ecological Studies

LI Shumin<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Associate Professor, English Department, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics Dongfang College, Hangzhou, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

This thesis analyzes the relationship between man and nature as portrayed in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In the narrative poem, his unique views on Nature present a remote echo to today's ecological concerns and scientific efforts to improve our ecosystem. The current study explores the implied ideas of Coleridge's poetical manifestation and contemporary activists' environmental consciousness so as to join the increasingly important discussion of how human beings adapt a reasonable pace to relieve some of the unbearable burden they have exerted on the Earth at an unprecedented speed and in a large scale. Such analytic attempts focus mainly on the critical connection between natural ecology and spiritual ecology. When understanding sustainable development at both the natural and spiritual levels, mankind may find real motivations to respect and protect Nature, and live in harmony with Nature.

**Key words:** Coleridge; Nature; Perception of Nature; Natural ecology; Spiritual ecology

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### INTRODUCTION

With the rapid deterioration of the natural environment, the human race is now experiencing much ecological

anxiety and panic. Why do we live? And how do we live? The original harmonious relationship between people and nature is becoming more and more encroached by material pollutions, and human spiritual ecological environment is also undergoing "metamorphosis" and "dislocation". The relationship between man and nature becomes the most fundamental content of human ultimate concern. In fact, ecological feelings and ecological worries have been deeply rooted in the minds of the writers who have the sense of responsibility and incisive insights. In the 19th century, the romanticists, who were deeply influenced by the French revolution, pursued freedom, worshiped Nature, and advocated returning to Nature and seeking a poetic way of living. Those works—which show great praise to and yearning for idyll life, with beautiful lakes and mountains—express human freedom and beauty. They also question and denounce the human alienation brought by the modern scientific rationalism and material civilization. These poets and writers rightly present their deep concerns about the value of life repressed by civilization, the alienation of the natural ecology and spiritual ecology, and the future of human survival.

### 1. COLERIDGE'S PARTICULAR PERCEPTION OF NATURE COMPARED WITH WORDSWORTH

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of founders and prolific poets of English Romanticism. His view of nature, compared with other British romantic poets, has both similarity and its own uniqueness and foresightedness. Coleridge and Wordsworth, the great representatives of British Romantic literature, when facing the ruins of their dreams in the materialistic society, tried their best, on the one hand, to live in the landscape, to find spiritual sustenance. On the other hand, they sought spiritual consolation through religious meditation. They proposed

to "return to the Middle Ages", for which they meant to search for God and get far away from the earthly world.

What should be pointed out is that the Romantic poets were not medieval religious believers. Their worship of God was, in essence, their ultimate reality of mind. Their reclusive kingdom of heaven was nothing more than individual freedom of hearts. For Coleridge, seeking God is just to find the order and the integrity of the world in one's heart; being reclusive in the heaven is to make oneself "get into the free kingdom of literary imagination and to ultimately understand one's chaotic social life through art creation" (Lu, 2006, p.94).

As for Wordsworth, "Nature is a kind of existence not only in spirit, but also in material" (Su, 2000, p.46). Nature, as an existence of spirit in Wordsworth's mind is the "trinity of human nature, reason and divinity" (Ibid.). That is, Nature is stable, orderly and heartfelt, capable of providing reason for human beings and making the mankind kind and compassionate. Not mysterious, Wordsworth's view of Nature, as embedded in his works, is always the embodiment of beauty and the incarnation of the divinity. Nature's pure plain is eternally "full of charm like a sublime song, not only arousing the passion of people, but also offering people with the wisdom and strength" (Hou, 1999, p.343). Coleridge's view of Nature, by contrast, is mysterious and complex. Coleridge also hails Nature, but in his view, nature is not a pure irrational object. On the contrary, it is a masterpiece and the divine creation of God in terms of its essence. Nevertheless, the wisdom of nature and that of the mankind are different. The former "lies in its scheduled integrity of performances, ideas and products that take place simultaneously". But there is no reflective activity in the midst of it. Thus, it is not morally responsible. On the contrary, man is the "leader of visible creatures in its own unique reflection, freedom and choice" (Abrams, 1971, p.144). Obviously, Nature in Wordsworth's mind is sweet and harmony, approachable, good and sacred. He believes that mankind survives by attaching to Nature. That is to say, the two merge with each other, making themselves in one. But for Coleridge, Nature is a unity of plurality and diversity, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, divinity and vulgarity. How can human beings acquire the nature of being positive and kind? There is no doubt that human beings must be responsible for Nature's retribution. Man must act on the basis of moral ethics and make the right decisions to get kind and sacred return from nature. For Coleridge, man is the moral subject of nature, and nature is the object of morality. People in western spiritual world ruled by the anthropocentrism, western rationalism, ignored the reality of Nature, while Coleridge proposed that a poem should be "the medium and reconciliation between man and nature", "humanize Nature", which means "to make people's subjectivity reflect in nature", "so, God is reflected in nature, in return, Nature also became a proof of the existence of

God" (Gao, 2004, pp.144-146). Because, for Coleridge, God is in Nature. The two are inseparable. That is what makes his poems mysterious, and his Nature is the one of divinity.

Wordsworth is widely regarded as a pantheist, but so does Coleridge. What is different between them is that the former shapes the sanctity of nature from the perspective of gentleness, kindness and being friendly to human beings. He is "famous for describing the orderly and organized nature. He has found a new home for mankind in that ordinary nature" (Su, 2000, p.50). On the contrary, Nature in Coleridge's eye is legendary and supernatural, full of magic and strong emotions, which is a combination of kindness and cruelty to humanity. In other words, Wordsworth shows people's serious dependence on Nature from the positive aspect while the inseparable and mutually existing relations in Coleridge's works are entailed in natural violence and cruelty as revenges to humans. The Nature of Coleridge not only covers the gentle and selfless human nature of Wordsworth's, but also the retaliating, manic and fierce forces. By contrast, Coleridge understands nature multi-dimensionally, and more thorough and objective. His nature view emphasizes that people should be responsible for it because how human beings treat nature would make them get the same treatment from nature. And harm to nature would mislead mankind to get harm in due course. Ultimately, what can eventually determines the recurring attitudes and ways of nature to mankind is just those of mankind given to nature. Coleridge's works stood out in the time when rationalistic people widely believed that human beings can consume nature at will. They are part of the precious few works that clearly display the protests of Nature against the unfair treatment of human beings and make emotional appeals for kind and equal treatment to Nature. Therefore, Coleridge has an ecological ethics which is advanced and should be valued. His strong voice will encourage the conscientious humans in their efforts to reclaim the harmony in natural and spiritual ecology.

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## **2. THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER: A NEW ODYSSEY OF SALVATION**

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History has witnessed terrible things whenever some members of the human race hurt the innate tie of human life and the natural world, lost their natural conscience to guide their life experience, discarded the inclusive attitude toward biological evolution, showed no respect or compassion for the rest of living beings, or lived in a space with themselves as the primacy. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a provocative masterpiece about ecological ethics, calling for respect to Nature and compassion for life. Out of the discontentment with the British government, Coleridge was passionate about the dream of democracy and freedom born in the French Revolution.

But he also experienced deep frustration and fear for the cruelty and violence brought by revolution as well. Just as the “Spiritual Father” of romantic literature, Rousseau, once said, the nature of human beings was originally good, but the development of human civilization blinded mankind and distorted their innate nature. The Utopia deep in Coleridge’s wonderland took him back to the arms of nature. When the bloody revolution was no longer the ultimate destination of his sense of social responsibility and historical mission, he, with his wise insight and far-sighted vision, chose to focus on the environmental problems that were already threatening the survival and future of mankind. For him, that was far more urgent than any other issues concerning the livelihood of mankind.

On one hand, Coleridge, the sharp-minded thinker with far-sighted ecological awareness, helped to awaken people’s awareness of ecological crisis and environmental protection through his selective descriptions. People at that time all tried to guess and understand the phenomena described in *The Rime*, like “The charmed water burnt always. A still and awful red.” and “the rotting sea”, but all ended up in vain. As a matter of fact, the burning red light refers to the red tide caused by marine pollution, for it looks like the burning flame in distance, while “the rotting sea” means that numerous marine organisms especially fish, died from the poisonous red tide and rotted on the seaside (Liu, 2006, p.109). And these phenomena described in his work are the same as today’s marine and river pollution. Coleridge, as an amateur biologist and a great ecological forecaster, has a more intuitive and foreseeing view on the destruction of natural environment caused by industrial development than all other romantic poets. In a way, this masterpiece intended to sound the ecological alarm for mankind more than two decades ago while the influence brought by the Industrial Revolution did not draw people’s attention until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was already too late. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* deserves its reputation as “the greatest ecological allegory”, the greatest of all time.

On the other hand, in *The Rime*, Coleridge uses the ancient mariner and his complicated and eccentric experience to offer salvation for mankind: getting into distress—being saved by an albatross—shooting the albatross and getting into danger again—sincerely blessing the water-snake and then getting physical and spiritual redemption—atonement for his sins and exhorting others. Although the tone of the story is dark and the atmosphere is suffocating, it is also the poet’s positive inspirational drama. In this long narrative poem, this unnamed ancient mariner represents all mankind, and the albatross symbolizes nature. When the ancient mariner shoots the albatross, the message is that mankind is trying to separate their tie with nature. Then the ancient mariner is immersed in a short peace, not knowing the following misfortune. Just like Engels (1973, p.517) said: “We must not over-indulge in our victory over nature

because for every such victory, nature has revenged us”. Hence, soon afterwards, the crew gets into a desperate situation again. The reason—why Coleridge keeps alive the ancient mariner who is the arch-criminal, and gives him an opportunity to have a rebirth, to become aware of repentance, to teach others he meets after going through a spiritual purgatory and a long spiritual suffering—is to shock the readers and tell them that mankind is negligible in front of nature, their confrontation with it will lead to their doom, and therefore only by living in harmony with nature can they survive. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which deserves its reputation as an ecological epic about human development, has a metaphorical meaning for the historical process of the evolution of the relationship between humans and nature: the primitive and harmonious stage of revering nature and depending on it; the confrontation stage, in which the nature is enslaved by the human-centered civilization; and a future stage, in which people reflect on their relationship between man and nature, the spiritual crisis that they are experiencing, and how to achieve a harmonious coexistence between mankind and nature.

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### 3. MAN AND NATURE IN THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

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First, *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is about the unity of nature and man. Coleridge is known as the most philosophical theorist of the English Romantic Poets. The poem takes the reader on a long journey: from the calm beginning, to the man being saved from the bird in the predicament, and then to the natural revenge after the man kills the bird, and finally to the man saved again after a deep introspection and a sincere atonement. It is not difficult to understand Coleridge’s life philosophy—the identity between man and nature in essence. The center of his theory is similar to the Chinese philosophy of Big One, or in Chinese, Taiyi, that is, man and nature are inseparable as one entity as “the whole of the beginning and the extremely good.” Besides, his view of nature pinpoints the ultimate concern of human beings, and he advocates the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. Only in this way can human beings be saved in danger, save themselves and help others. At this point, he also puts forward his perception of alienation. Once man and nature are estranged from each other, man will be alienated physically and spiritually. Human beings lived happily and naively in the Garden of Eden in the early days because they respected nature, respected their sensibility rather than reason, and were in a state of unity between man and nature. But as technology and industry have continued to advance and develop, mankind has begun to abandon, perhaps unconsciously, the path of poetical habitat. Also when they began to advocate rationalism and anthropocentrism, they have alienated



nature. The imbalance of ecology and mentality leads to alienation, which is the disaster mankind is experiencing now. Coleridge's poetic thought not only represents his personal view, but also represents the voice of a few British pioneers who protested against the mainstream extreme rationalism at that time, and called for treating nature well and returning to the harmonious state of man and nature.

Second, *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is about crime and punishment. The concept of crime and punishment in Christian meaning has already become a reflection of the pursuit of Western humanistic ideals and beliefs and the contradiction of anthropocentric mind. The story of *the Rime* is not complicated, but the moral is very profound: punishing vice, and praising virtue and harmonious unity. The guilty must be punished. As it is often said, when God created man, he also created the contradiction between man's desire and duty (Li, 1989, p.158). In Western literary practice and ethics, crime and punishment are portrayed in a two-dimensional pattern: desire is the ultimate source of crime, and punishment is the warning of the consequences of responsibility. The albatross in the poem is the symbol of the spirit of Christ. The killing of the albatross is tantamount to the elimination and abandonment of the deity. At the same time, the man is abandoned by the god, which is thus the embodiment of human crime and punishment. And the appearance of the shining water snake is the symbol of the resurrection of the Holy Spirit. The experience of the old sailor from the cruel shooting of albatrosses to the pious prayer for the water snake also symbolizes the tortuous journey from original sin to repentance and rebirth. What's more, religion has a strong ability to integrate various ideologies in concept, but also has the characteristics of macrocosm and extremity in the way of thinking (Lu, 2006, p.94). Coleridge uses religious terminology to summarize the two extremes of desire and responsibility in the human spirit, and explores profoundly the human mind.

When romantic poets such as Wordsworth turn their odes to nature, place their emotions on the landscape of the lake and the mountains, and pursue tranquility and become indifferent to fame and fortune, they are actually building the equality, harmonious and friendly relations between man and nature, as well as pursuing the entire ecological dynamic balance of the Earth. Coleridge is also one of the main representatives of romantic poets at that time, but his book of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* presents readers with a different tone of gray images, deliberately leaving the old sailor in complete rupture and opposition with other lives. When he shoots the albatross, a bird that symbolizes the spirit of freedom, mankind has to taste their own bitter fruit after the destruction of the free spirit. When human beings ignore the existence of nature, override it, and blindly advocate the anthropocentrism, they are separated from nature and go further and further away from nature, thus plundering

and destroying nature wantonly. At this time, the reward of nature to humanity is no longer grand and generous, but a spiritual purgatory that is heavy, mysterious and horrible. The thought implied by the poet in his works is to punish evil and promote good, and those who destroy the harmonious relationship with nature will be retaliated by nature. Since man and nature are each other's destiny, they should coexist harmoniously. At present, the deteriorating ecological environment is nature's revenge for human crimes. Bette, a famous British researcher of ecological literature, commented that what Coleridge laments in this poem is not the tragedy of fate, but the tragedy of the humanistic ethics of nature or the earth, and he criticizes the arrogance of mankind and the cruelty of seeking satisfaction without considering the nature of materiality (Bate, 2000).

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#### 4. A CENTURIAL ECHO: EVOLUTION OF ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS TO ITS MODERNITY

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The relation between man and nature is a universal motif that demonstrates how mankind exercises its ethics and attends to life consciousness and spiritual ecology. As humans progress in the material civilization and rational recognition, they have gained new perspectives to control and perceive nature. From ancient time of barbarism to present era of science and technology, the relation between man and nature has undertaken 3 phases: harmony, rupture and contradictory unity. Not until 20<sup>th</sup> century when spiritual crisis and material disaster caused by modern industrial prosperity became visible did humans begin to re-explore, reflect and re-position their relation with nature.

The modern environmental view of nature holds that nature is a dynamic balance stemmed from a long period of geological and natural evolution between animals and plants, organic substance and inorganic matter, the earth and other planets. It is a physical existence and a vigorous organic substance as well (Xun, 1994, pp.218-219). Despite of humans' superior competence and specialties to other species, it does not mean that they have the exclusive privilege to willfully manipulate, enslave, abuse, invade, or deprive the rights of other species to live free.

Samuel Coleridge, known as "the great ecological prophet" foresaw this problem a century ago. His poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was not accepted after publication for a long time because of the grotesque and mysterious plot in it. The characters, objects, scenery in the poem are enveloped by a supernatural power. The poem was considered a sermonic story of religion and mythology, attempting to warn or preach to people what is sin or crime and punishment and why they are closely

associated with karma. Few or even no one can perceive the far-reaching meaning of the relation between man and nature contained in the poem—"oneness or harmony in nature and man". The "consciousness of being proactive" indicated in Coleridge's poem a century ago corresponds to the global motif humans attend to today—the relation between man and nature. In this sense, with such "a centurial echo", Coleridge is in undoubtedly a great proactive ecologist. Back then, however, the only one who backed him is Charles Lamb, a well known British writer, who commented that "for such a poem, what we can do is only to feel, taste, and meditate, but not to discuss, describe, analyze or criticize" (Spenser, 1983, p.154).

With the improvement of science and technology, mankind has become the master of nature and uses its own standards to think about all things. People have changed their reverence from nature to science. As Liu (2003) thoughtfully pointed out, when people regard nature as "the conquered, utilized and possessed object," and no longer hold a special reverence for nature, "their internalized nature has been unfortunately 'alienated'—the split between sense and sensibility, abstraction and specification, epistemology and logical thinking, intuition and logical deduction" (p.23). It is the alienation of mankind's internal nature that has stimulated the alienation of man and nature. Thus "sensible" mankind has begun the process of alienating, restricting and conquering nature. These days, with the worsening global ecological environment, land desertification, air and water pollution, low vegetation coverage, the destruction of atmospheric layers, energy depletion, endangering rare species and frequent occurrence of wars and diseases, the human race has added unbearable burden on the Earth at unprecedented speed and scale, and paid a full price for their blind and unscrupulous actions. More shockingly, behind the natural ecological crisis are the material greed and insatiable appetite for wealth, which have deprived people of their innate nature. The crisis in spirit is becoming more dreadful. The overflow and prevalence of various doctrines have actually made people confused and get lost about beliefs, ethics, morals and the meaning of life. Meanwhile, more and more individuals feel depressed and become decadent as they seek for individualistic survival. The wilderness will no longer be T. S. Eliot's literary fiction and imagination. It is now almost the reality of many human societies. Money worship, materialism, hedonism, pragmatism, utilitarianism and individualism have repeatedly become the obstacles to the spiritual ecosystem of human health. Human beings should bear in mind that the collapse of natural ecology will destroy human beings, and in turn will severe the imbalance of spiritual ecology because the balance of spiritual ecology is an extremely important part of the whole ecological system and it even determines the

whole level of the Earth's ecology. Martin Heidegger held the view that the nature of the new era is determined by non-deification and the disappearance of God and gods from the world. The earth has become a "lost planet", and people are "uprooted from the Earth" and lose their own "spiritual homeland" (1993, p.195). Martin Heidegger thereby issued a serious warning to us that the loss of spiritual ecology causing the destruction of human being may precede the destruction brought by any advanced civilizations. With a heavy mood, James Joyce (1985), the celebrity of stream of consciousness, once pointed out that materialism, which shared the origins with the Renaissance, "had destroyed people's spiritual function and obstructed their further improvement. Modern people have conquered space, the earth, diseases, and ignorance, but all these great victories are only a drop of tears in the melting pot of the spirit!". In order to alleviate and solve ecological crisis and avoid the occurrence of disasters, mankind should be first of all deal with the relationship between man and nature. Starting from alleviating the conflicts and confrontations between man and nature, we should readjust the value system of our modern society and recover the human spiritual ecology in a workable way. The western contemporary thinker Ervin Laszlo has, when analyzing human's ecological predicament, thought that the extremity of survival lies not in the Earth's natural ecology, but in people's inner heart as well as their choices of attitudes towards life and ways of living. He wrote: "The biggest limitation of human being is not external, but internal. It is the limitation of people's will and comprehension that obstruct our advancement toward a brighter future rather than that of the Earth" (2004, p.15). The scientific method of solving the ecological crisis requires comprehensive exploration and humanistic encouragement. It is not enough to rely solely on the improvement of science and technology and management. It is time to fully consider the variable of "people's inner nature" in saving our endangered ecosystem.

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## CONCLUSION

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The most fundamental reason behind the deterioration of natural ecology and spiritual ecology is an overall imbalance between human beings and natural environment, human beings and other lives, the outer and inner selves of humanity (Xue, 2008). Thoreau mentioned that every man is his own enemy and destiny. We must be clear that barren land, muddy rivers, busy life and dirty environment are not what people hoped to see. And places without flowers, birds or freely running animals are absolutely not what people are yearning for. There is something else when science and technology make rapid progress. Only when all human truly assume the responsibility of rescuing the ecology can we have a bright future.

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