

**Need to live in harmony with the animal kingdom
– Tracing man’s natural instinct to be violent
(Comparative study of ‘The Ancient
Mariner’ and ‘The Snake’)**

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ABSTRACT

Since the stone age, man followed his instincts. Times changed. Scientific inventions changed his life forever. As time passed, many rules and regulations were chalked out to curb his violent instincts. He was expected to behave in a particular way. If he did not follow rules, he was punished. A formal system of punishment was set up to ensure that his behavior was confined to what is right. The system remains the same today albeit with some changes. Man still continues to follow his instincts and his deviant behavior is trimmed. However, there is one area where the rules need to be reinforced. This is about the vulnerable and the so called ‘voiceless’ – the animal kingdom. Since man is bestowed with the art of speaking, he marches ahead vainly singing his glories conveniently forgetting that the animals are also a beautiful creation of god himself which need to be nurtured. Man has always felt the need to proclaim his supremacy over all others. In this pursuit, he goes too far in his arrogance, he feels superior and declares himself to be the master of all. In the process, he forgets that he is also one part in the scheme of things. He may have become powerful by virtue of using his brain, but he also lags behind in many aspects by the vice of his greed. Poets are bestowed with sensitivity which allows them to paint pictures of emotions vividly in our minds.

Two poets D.H. Lawrence and S.T. Coleridge belong to two different genre of literature but skillfully portray the basic instinct of man to be violent. They converge on one common ground when the Ancient Mariner kills the messenger of God, the albatross and the man, under the influence of arrogant education attacks the harmless snake. The research paper is an endeavor to find the common thread of this urge of man to be violent animals without provocation as a means to proclaim his superiority.

Keywords : *Violent instincts, albatross, snake, harmony, symbolism, sea voyage, romantics, modernism*

Man’s innate instinct to indulge in offensive behaviour remains at the backdrop of many literary pursuits. History is replete with examples of man indulging in mindless violence. This holds true in case he is faced with the voiceless creatures of the animal kingdom. Although over a period of time, we have learnt to curb this instinct and in many cases repress it. Researchers have delved much into this field and focused mainly on the man of the primitive era. This paper aims to take this search forward by identifying this urge across genres.

This paper aims to identify this urge prevalent in two literary genres namely romanticism and modernism which are generally associated with eulogizing individualism. Also, it focuses on the need for mankind to live in harmony with nature. These famous poems belong to two different genres namely romanticism and modernism. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1835) was one of the Lake poets and one of the pioneers of ushering in the romantic era. He has created a great masterpiece in the form of the ancient mariner.

“The result was one of the most important publications of the Romantic period, a collection of Lyrical Ballads, With a Few Other Poems, published in Bristol in 1798. According to Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the plan of the Lyrical Ballads was that he should supply poems whose sub-matter was supernatural, while Wordsworth’s would deal with ordinary life. Coleridge honoured his part of the bargain with ‘The Ancient Mariner’, which appeared as the first poem in the collection.” (Alexander, pg 285)

The poem is in the form of a narrative which an ancient mariner shares with a wedding guest who listens to him most unwillingly. The poem has many biblical connotations, symbols, images woven beautifully into the fabric of the poem but the subject matter of this paper is to focus on the act of violence undertaken by the mariner without any instigation on part of the mythical bird albatross which seemingly brings good luck and good weather for the sailors on board.

“It is an experimental ballad narrative of a voyage to the South Pole, of the mariner’s arbitrary killing of an albatross, and of psychic punishment, a death-in-life, which lifts when the beauty of nature suddenly impels the mariner to bless God’s creation. This symbolic supernatural romance was decorated with archaisms.” (Alexander, pg 235)

‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is one of the best known classical poems written in English. It delves into the world of sin, retribution and guilt in the backdrop of a sea expedition which further lends a mystic hue. The world of the mariner is neither real nor unreal and the readers explore the liminal space along with the mariner. The end leaves the reader with mixed emotions. First is the feeling of guilt, the pangs of remorse and the qualms of consciousness which prick him beyond measure. He is first accused by his fellow mariners and despite the temporary relief in the form of raindrops to quench his thirst and calm his tormented soul, he faces retribution. When he shares this story with a wedding guest and talks about his sufferings, the latter wakes up the next day ‘sadder’ and ‘wiser’. The end reinforces the Christian values of sin and retribution and also lessons mankind to live in harmony with nature. It is the second point which forms the central idea of this paper.

‘Snake’ is a poem by D.H. Lawrence, who is an English writer belonging to the modern era. His poem vividly describes a hot summer day when a snake ‘visits’ his water trough to drink water. And here again the poet, epitomizing human race misses his chance to honour the king of exile. In the end, he regrets his behaviour, feels petty and curses the voice of education which instigates him to hit the snake who comes to drink water at his water trough.

‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

“God save thee, ancient Mariner!

From the fiends, that plague thee thus !-

Why look’st thou so?” - With my cross-bow

I shot the Albatross.

(The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.)(Halmi, Magnuson, Modiano, pg 65)

As the mariner narrates the tale of his voyage which begins happily, the wedding guest becomes curious as to why the sailor looks so dejected. This prompts the mariner to continue with his narrative. The wedding guest seems to have no choice but to listen to the story as if under a spell.

When the mariners reach the icy patch in the ocean, the albatross comes as a messenger of God and disperses the ice bergs. His presence is blissful. However, as an act of impulse, the mariner kills the albatross with his cross bow. Thereafter, the poem narrates of the tale of retribution. The mariner and other sailors must expiate for his sins. The carcass around his neck reminds him of his guilt which he bears till the end.

“The motion of the ship is caused by supernatural agency, the Polar spirit. A sudden spurt causes the Mariner to swoon, and while unconscious he hears two other spirits discuss his crime, and how the Polar spirit ‘loved the bird that loved the man/ Who shot him with his bow’ (in lines 399-401 ‘cross’, ‘bow’ and ‘Albatross’ recur). The other spirit refers to the penance the Mariner has done, and prophesies that he ‘penance more will do’.” (Gravil, pg 33)

The poem is known for its” nightmarish images and homely morals into a rhymed doggerel hard to forget:” Water, water everywhere / Nor any drop to drink’ and ‘A sadder and a wiser man/ He rose the morrow morn’.” (Alexander, pg 235)

The wedding guest who hears the tale of the ancient mariner gets up the next morning a little wiser and sadder. Such ideas resound in many of Coleridge’s poems. Such poems have this dream like quality. They involve similar nightmarish experiences. These include ‘The Ancient Mariner’, ‘Christabel’, and ‘Kubla Khan’.

“The tale of ‘The Ancient Mariner’ has been seen as an allegory of the poet’s curse, in that the poet, too, surrenders domestic tranquility in order to undergo strange visions, whose content it is his fate to preach. “

These figures are, it is said projections of the poet himself, as he was the ‘dreamer of these dreams and visions’.(Gravil, pg 66)

“I pass, like night, from land to land;

I have strange power of speech;

That moment that his face I see,

I know the man that must hear me:

To him my tale I teach.”

‘The Snake’

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), is a modernist, who wrote during the nineteenth century. Post world war, he wrote with reflections of the contemporary social life.

“...he retained an evangelical true-or-false model of what is good, a moral intelligence and a St Paul-like temperament. His writing is powered by tensions between the classes or the sexes or mind and body, or more apocalyptically, between natural life and a civilization of death.” (Alexander, pg 343)

As the poet nears his water trough on a hot day in July in Sicily, he is happy to see a snake drinking water from a puddle in the clearing near the tap. He feels elated and observes that the snake is harmless as the cattle and seems unaware of the presence of the poet.

“He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more..”

The snake is apparently harmless and even disinterested in the presence of the poet. However, as the snake gets ready to go back to the burning bowels of the earth, the voice of education inside the poet protest. It tells the poet to be brave and not succumb by being so foolish as to not harm the venomous golden brown snake. And there he goes. He picks up a ‘clumsy’ log and hastily throws it at the who startled by this unwarranted attack coils himself back to the dark bowels of the earth.

“...every element of Lawrence’s work is imbued with an overarching philosophical struggle. His work is the site of a singular blurring of literary forms, perhaps an unprecedented refusal of the strictures of genre and knowledge categories. A reading of Lawrence’s interdisciplinarity is overdue.” (Williams, pg 5)

I.CONCLUSION

The two poems, written in different time periods resonate the same idea. When the albatross is killed by the mariner, there is no provocation on the part of albatross. Similarly, the snake is like a revered guest, harmless and majestic, which is unmajestically shooed away by the poet. Both the narrators are haunted by pangs of guilt. However, the pangs of guilt literally and symbolically hang around the neck of the mariner. In the same way, the snake is referred to as the ‘albatross’ when the narrator fails to be hospitable to the snake which had simply come to the water trough to quench his thirst. Interpreted in the contemporary context, man is unmindful of the damage done to the animal kingdom as acts of impulse. We fail to live in harmony with them. And therefore, must be ready for the catastrophic consequences. We encroach upon their habitats and many species become extinct as a result of our careless behavior. Very soon, our generation will bear the consequences of this imbalance.

“Many of the poets of this period found their deepest experiences in nature. For them it was nature, rather than society, that was man’s proper setting : man needed the help of nature to fulfill himself.” (Alexander, pg 277)

It is the subject matter of another research paper when the discussion revolves around the lessons that we, humans may learn from the beasts ; the spirit of co-habitation, harmonious existence of all, eating and killing only when hungry, mating after mutual consent, using rare resources only when needed and the list is endless. The objective of this paper is to find the common thread of natural impulse of man to be violent. When a baby takes his first wobbly steps, he sees an ant crawling its way merrily to some destination, the baby instantly follows the ant and squashes it. The same goes for lizards and other household insects which seem to just hover around. As he grows older, two things impede this desire. One, the ‘fear’ factor when he realizes that these creatures may strike back or two, the voice of education which tells him that he may live in harmony with nature. Education, unlike the voice in ‘The Snake’ encourages him to shun unmindful violence. He slowly moulds and nudges himself to follow the norms. He recognizes his position in the organism kingdom and realizes that all creatures, have the right to live, as he does. And that, violence may be resorted to, in case of an imminent threat or as a defense measure. Researchers have focused on this violent side of man’s psyche but this

paper attempts to find a common thread in all genres. In today's world, this holds true as in any other era. If we continue to destroy nature with impunity, we might be soon dragged to the uncharted part of the ocean where all stands still and our existence will be like a painting on the canvas of the world. The natural catastrophes are a sign of the albatross which we carry around our necks and the tale of retribution follows. Man may either be coerced into good action by the fear of God or his own existence. The latter holds more power in today's world. The Albatross was a Christian soul, a messenger of God and the Snake was an uncrowned king in exile. May this generation keep it date with the natural kingdom and reach the shore safely.

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