



“I shot the ALBATROSS”: A critical evaluation of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in the epoch of COVID-19.

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Abstract

The effect of Coronavirus through S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and gives a biblical perspective. Mistreating the natural world is one of the root causes of human suffering. The human race was created in God's image, but their gluttony is wreaking havoc on the natural world and driving countless other species to extinction. The effects of Covid - 19 on human life have been incalculable. Does the human generation have any valuable lessons to learn about how to respect nature and other creatures as a result of witnessing the episode of Covid - 19?

The whole world was under lockdown due to a microscopic creature, Coronavirus, responsible for taking away many innocent lives around the world. The name “Coronavirus” is derived from the Latin word *corona*, meaning “crown” or “wreath”. According to an article published in 2013, “Proteolytic Activation of the SARS-Coronavirus Spike Protein: Cutting enzymes at the cutting edge of antiviral research,” Coronavirus is defined as:

Infection begins when the viral spike(s) glycoprotein attaches to its complementary host cell receptor. After attachment, a protease of the host cell cleaves and activates the receptor-attached spike protein. Depending on the host cell protease available, cleavage and activation allow the virus to enter the host cell by endocytosis or direct fusion of the viral envelope with the host membrane.¹

¹Simmons et al., ‘Proteolytic Activation of the SARS-Coronavirus Spike Protein’.

The outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei region of China, in December 2019 and was recognised as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020.² The pandemic has led to severe global socioeconomic disruption³ and the postponement or cancellation of many world events. Many nations have isolated themselves. Initially, India was one of them, which observed 21 days of nationwide lockdown. Extensive fear of supply shortages has encouraged panic buying, chaos and insecurity among all classes of society. There have been rising episodes of xenophobia and racism against Chinese and other Southeast Asian people. Deception and conspiracy theories about the Coronavirus intensify with the virus's growing impact. As a consequence, India had to go on extreme lockdown.

There are two prevailing theories: 1) China launched this virus to start a biological war against the West, and 2) the food habits of the people of China and the South-East Asia region have encouraged the widespread wildlife farming industry and illegal trafficking.

The Coronavirus has brought abysmal pain in the world. A news programme on Australian TV called "Sixty Minutes" whose journalist interviewed environmental and human rights investigator, Steven Galstone, compared this type of virus to a sleeping time bomb. It is "mother nature's revenge"⁴ against humanity. This article will critically evaluate the effect of Coronavirus through S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and give a biblical perspective.

This is not an appropriate platform to discuss the conspiracy theory of the Coronavirus as biological warfare as it is a subject of a more extensive investigation and higher debate. Moreover, I will be dwelling on the anomalous eating traditions of the people in that region. Initial studies suggested that the virus came from the wet market selling wild animals (with some endangered species) for human consumption. The question arises, why do these regions have such diet traditions? The eating customs of the locals in this area are investigated further in this article. In an interview with the Vox channel, Professor Li gave the reason for China's atypical food patterns. According to him, back in 1978, when the Chinese economy was on the verge of collapse, the Communist regime of that period opened up to privatisation. In the 80s, small farms started making a profit by rearing wild animals, and the government encouraged their trading to bring the

²"WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020".

³Here Comes the Coronavirus Pandemic: Now, after Many Fire Drills, the World May Be Facing a Real Fire'.

⁴Bartlett, 'Journalist Goes Undercover at "Wet Markets", Where the Coronavirus Started.'

nation out of poverty. In 1988, the government introduced the wildlife protection law, wherein Article 3 says— “states shall own wildlife resources. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of units and individuals engaged in the development or utilisation of wildlife resources according to the law”⁵ and Article 17 says, “The states shall encourage the domestication and breeding of wildlife....”⁶ As a result, legal wildlife farmers’ rapacity turned into illegal trafficking syndicates and contributed to China’s GDP through lobbying. Is it possible that China has moved from a state of need to one of greed by disturbing the natural balance of the earth and depleting its resources? It is important for us to consider whether humans can exist without nature. To understand and answer this question, it is necessary to study S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” through the lens of life under the “Coronavirus” crisis.

When the Ancient Mariner decided to narrate his own story to the wedding guest, this was a turning point in the progression of thought within the narrative poetry written during the Romantic period. Ancient Mariner establishes his story by mentioning the voyage in which he sets off in a cheerful mood; then, in the middle of his journey, he kills the Albatross who came as a “Christian soul” to the ship, amid the ocean. The outcome of the killing of the Albatross was followed by the occurrence of the supernatural element in a maleficent manner. The darkness of his sin makes him repugnant with himself and the world. In addition to this, the pain and anguish drive him to his absolute limit. However, once all his psychological, emotional, and bodily sufferings were over, everything was reformed to his advantage, and the company of angelic spirits and the natural world worked together to bring him back to his home awakened physically and spiritually.

The poem gives Coleridge the power to bring the truth of nature “by transfer from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth sufficient to procure for those shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith.”⁷ Besides, his portrayal of human psychology, he describes the Mariner’s feelings after killing the Albatross, in the presence of the supernatural, which is fear and repentance, pity, and love for all creatures that live and move. Finally, Coleridge made the Mariner pray, which he never thought of in his wildest dream.

⁵The Fourth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People’s Congress and Promulgated by Order No. 9 of the President of the People’s Republic of China’.

⁶The Fourth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People’s Congress and Promulgated by Order No. 9 of the President of the People’s Republic of China’.

⁷Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV.

*He Prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*

Dealing with supernatural elements was astonishing to Coleridge. His first supernatural element in the poem was the Polar Spirit, who came to avenge the killing of the Albatross. It took the ship into the silent, motionless sea, where it got stuck.

*And some in dreams assured were
Of the spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow.*

Then there appears the skeleton ship, carrying Death and Life-in-Death as if engaged in a gambling contest. Then followed the death of all sailors on the ship, except the Ancient Mariner. Then, again, all the sailors came back to life, and angelic spirits entered their bodies which hadn't rotted yet. To end with, the angelic spirits came out from the dead body and appeared in the form of light other-worldly torches:

*Each corpse lay flat, lifeless and flat,
And, by the holy rood
A mass all light, a seraph-man,
On every corpse there stood.*

The author made the poem divine and fascinating by representing Man's sin and repentance, Nature's terror and beauty, and God's justice and mercy.

The emotional and psychological realism of Ancient Mariner was exposed when the skeleton ship arrived; fear swallowed the lifeblood of the Mariner. He tried to pray but could not and felt the horror of the curse of the dead men's eyes. The author fully conveys the sense of utter helplessness and solitude.

*Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea!*

*And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.*

The Mariner now sensed pain and guilt for killing the Albatross that God and man had forsaken him. But his repentance and self-criticism turn the narrative. His ship comes to land, and the silent presence of the angels fills him with hope and joy.

*This seraph-band, each waved his hand,
No voice did they impart—
No voice; but O, the silence sank
Like music on my heart.*

The Ancient Mariner was doomed to tell his story as his retribution. Here the author portrays the importance of the “Wedding Guest,” who was about to enter the bridegroom’s door. Now the question arises why a “Wedding Guest?” Although he is a listener, he is the one who brought out the unequivocal spiritual crisis he experiences after killing the Albatross. He also draws attention to the much-awaited confession from the Mariner that he shot the Albatross:

*With my crossbow
I shot the ALBATROSS.*

The Wedding Guest was the link between the two worlds. One was the world of the Mariner’s sin, and the other was the world of the reality of redemption. He is the face of wisdom amid egoism.

Lastly, the Wedding Guest was a valid learner from the story of the Ancient Mariner, and now he was sadder and, at the same time, was a wise man. He was sad because of the realisation of the human wantonness and predicament that the Ancient Mariner has so vividly impressed on him through his story. On the other hand, he is wiser for the profound moral truth which he learnt, to love all creation, both great and small.

The Ancient Mariner and the sailors were optimistic when they left the harbour. However, during the voyage, the crew became depressed due to the encircling ice around their ship. Out of mist and fog appeared the Albatross as a “Christian soul.” The Albatross represents the animal kingdom, the human, and the spiritual world. Although the sailors welcomed the bird in the name of God, the Ancient Mariner kills it out

of arrogance and wantonness. The killing of the Albatross was an arbitrary and irrational act. He sinned against all human beings, the animal world, and God. The sailors knew it was wrong, but they praised the Mariner's crime for their short-term advantage when the mist and fog cleared. Their approval is not out of ignorance but due to wilful indifference to their conscience. Moreover, they were the people who hung the Albatross' dead body around the Mariner's neck when their surroundings became hostile. Is this true human nature? True human nature consists of kindness and cruelty – who gives us direction to yield to our better natures? But now in this senseless act of killing the albatross, everybody on the ship was the sinner of the gravest crime.

In conventional law, the Mariner is the actual sinner, and he should be condemned. But in the eyes of God, the higher morality, both the Ancient Mariner and all the sailors were guilty. Death is a lesser punishment than Life-in-Death. Therefore, all the sailors who appreciated the Mariner's sin were punished by death. At the same time, the Mariner was doomed to live and tell his story. His life became one of endless suffering, and at every moment he prayed for death as a relief, but he was denied the blessing of death. Thus, his punishment was greater than that of his companions.

In the eyes of the Creator, the animals on the land, the birds in the sky, the fish under the water and human beings each have their place in the arrangement of life on this earth. It is inappropriate for humans to believe that they control nature in any way. The Ancient Mariner was not a self-conscious man before, but he realised this after a painful experience in his life. The way to his salvation, shown by the author, was to confess his sin by telling his awful story indefinitely. It was a long process of penance that should be achieved through his self-consciousness and self-realisation, which was the source of his redemption.

As I ponder upon the current situation of our beautiful world in the epoch of COVID-19, I only see the arrogance of man, his exploitation of the earth, and the resulting destruction of the planet. King David writes in Psalm 8:4-8:

What is mankind that you are mindful of them,

human beings that you care for them?

You have made them, a little lower than the angels

and crowned them, with glory and honour.

You made them rulers over the works of your hands;

*you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
The birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.*

How can it be that a ‘crown-holder virus’ is responsible for taking the lives of the “rulers over the works of God’s hand—humankind”? Why the death of loneliness for those under whose feet all the animals’ kingdom resides? How is a microscopic virus transmitted to those who are little less than ‘Heavenly Beings’?

God created human beings in his image in the Biblical tradition Gen 1:27. He bestowed “free will” to them. The episode of fall into sin by Adam and Eve occurred in their “wilfully chosen” disobedience to God.⁸ Adler mentioned that ‘natural freedom’ (volitional freedom) is the freedom to determine one’s own “decisions or plans.” It is inherent in all people, in all circumstances, and “without regard to any state of mind or character that they may or may not acquire in their lives.”⁹ All humanity naturally possesses the “free choice of the will”. So, is greed also man’s ‘choice of will’? Will it be right to raise the question that the Ancient Mariner practised his ‘choice of will’ to shoot the Albatross? In a similar vein, how is it conceivable that in the name of ‘food habit,’ by self-determination, certain communities own and murder wildlife in a widespread manner by proclaiming that this is a practice of their ‘choice of will’?

King David’s son Solomon the wisest who man ever lived on the planet, said:

“The greedy bring ruin to their households...” Pro 15:27

“The greedy stir up conflict...” Pro 28:25

Even as Jesus said, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Adding to this, Paul also mentioned in Ephesians 4:19, “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.” Finally, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, said at Second

⁸Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

⁹Adler, *Idea of Freedom, Volume I, Dialectical Examination of the Controversies about Freedom*, Vol. 1:149.

International Conference on Nutrition, “God always forgives mankind, but the earth does not. If men continue to be greedy about abusing natural resources to make a profit, the earth will eventually take her revenge.”¹⁰ I believe greed is a psychological illness of humanity to consider himself superior over all other creatures of God. The Ancient Mariner shot the Albatross for no such reason, it portrayed his distorted mental state that I can kill you—bird, and you cannot do anything. It also showed a lack of respect and vulnerability for other more miniature creations of God. Is it not true that China is the country that drafted the law stating that the state owns all wild animals?

I think it is the right time to think about the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3:18-22:

I also said to myself, “As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust, all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”

So, I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

Our arrogance has made us flabby, and these verses indicate that we are negligible under the sun.

In conclusion, a selfish and boastful Ancient Mariner called out, “I shot the Albatross.” The Mariner had practised arrogance in his worldliness marked by vanity and had hatred for all creatures. As a result, sorrow, loneliness and suffering had struck him. He is the perfect representation of human greed and wantonness. As God has also abandoned him, he learnt his lessons very painfully. This world is the home to all God’s creations, and no one species has the right to dominate others. The Ancient Mariner learned the essence of prayer: to love all the creations of God, great or small, and God loves everything without making any distinction. The Coronavirus is a monster fashioned by human greed and a lack of respect for God’s creation. We human beings have “shot the Albatross”. As we go through this pain, suffering, death, and Life-in-Death, we may regain the joy of salvation and God’s healing touch as He is healing nature. Perhaps we can only pray:

¹⁰Lee, ‘Pope’.

Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your unfailing love;

according to your great compassion

blot out my transgressions.

Wash away all my iniquity

and cleanse me from my sin... Psalm 51:1-2

Create in me a pure heart, O God,

and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me from your presence

or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation

and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Psalm 51:10-12

Can we learn from the wedding guest's example, in which he decides to walk away from the door of the bridegroom after the conclusion of the story, becoming a sadder but wiser man in the process? So, at the end of COVID-19 exploitation, humans will be sadder because they will have lost so many loved ones, but they will also be wiser because they will know more profound truths about how to respect God's creation. Or we will still, in our arrogance, continue to proclaim, "I shot the ALBATROSS"?

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