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Supernatural Elements in Coleridge's "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner"

عناصر خارقة في كوليدج "زمن البحرية القديمة"

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Abstract: Supernatural elements can be considered as one of the important characteristics of the Romantic Age. The Romantic poets resorted to the beauty of the Supernatural. They believed that something existed beyond the physical world, the Spiritual world. The Spiritual world, according to the Romantics, had unleashed its power and inspiration to overthrow tyranny in literature. British Romanticism's treatment of the supernatural excluded horror and the macabre and focused on supernatural energy and beauty.

Coleridge is regarded as the greatest poet of the supernatural in English literature and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is regarded as one of the significant poems which include the supernatural elements. These elements in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" catch the reader's attention because they are out of the ordinary.

This study deals with the supernatural elements in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" showing how Coleridge uses these elements in his poem in the way that the supernatural has been made believable and

convincing.

الخلاصة: تعدّ العناصر الخارقة للطبيعة واحدة من أهم خصائص العصر الرومانسي. فقد لجأ شعراء الرومانسية الى الجمال الخارق. اذ انهم يعتقدون بوجود شيء خارج العالم المادي، وهو العالم الروحي. فالعالم الروحي، وفقا للرومانسيين، قد أطلق العنان بقوتها والهامها لازالة الطغيان في الأدب. فالرومانسيون البريطانيون استبعدوا الرعب والترويع وركزوا على القوة الخارقة للطبيعة وجمالها.

ويعد كولرج واحدا من أعظم الشعراء الذين كتبوا عن العناصر الخارقة للطبيعة في الأدب الإنجليزي وتعد "قصيدة البحار القديم" واحده من القصائد الخارقة للطبيعة. فالعناصر الخارقة للطبيعة في "قصيدة البحار القديم" تجذب انتباه القارئ لأنها خارجة عن المألوف. تتناول هذه الدراسة العناصر الخارقة للطبيعة في "قصيدة البحار القديم" للشاعر الانجليزي كولرج موضحةً كيفية استخدام كولرج العناصر الخارقة للطبيعة وجعلها اكثر إقناعاً.

Supernatural Elements in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

The development of Romanticism in English literature is associated with the poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 1798 saw the publication of Lyrical Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge. This year is seen as the key year for English Romanticism. These two poets were against the rational content of Augustan poetry. They wanted to return to imagination, legend and human heart. On the other hand the poet and painter William Blake is the most extreme example of the Romantic sensibility in English literature.

¹ His philosophy has a simple basis: he rejects reason and law. He says that mankind can be satisfied by the senses and imagination and he regards reason as a dangerous thing. Byron, Shelley and John Keats have also important roles in the development of Romanticism ².

The Romantic poets believed in the spiritual world, so they dealt with the supernatural world especially supernatural energy and beauty. At the same time they were not interested in horror³.

In fact, Romantic poets focused on the supernatural elements in order to have fascination with the control of audience. They always divide poetry into two parts: poems on ordinary, everyday objects in nature and poems in which "incidents and agents" are supernatural⁴.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge can be regarded as the most important poet who wrote about supernatural elements. His three major works, *The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan* all deal with supernatural elements. Writers like Horace were interested in cheap thrills, because he was too remote from human reality to touch the tender chords capable of producing still, sad music of humanity. Coleridge replaced crudeness with suggestiveness. He did not portray horror but he suggested it. In fact, suggestiveness is the keynote of Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural. One of the other important features of his treatment of the supernatural is a very clever and subtle mixing of the natural and supernatural. It is really difficult to locate where the one ends and the other begins. At the same time he takes us to distant times and remote places in his poems. His theory of imagination connects mind to nature. It can be said that today it has come a long way from the days of supernatural belief; for instance *Ghosts* no longer captures our imagination. Coleridge's poems remain as enjoyable works. They are meaningful because they are intensely human⁵.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner relates the events experienced by a mariner who has returned from a long sea voyage. The Mariner stops a man who is on his way to a wedding ceremony and begins to recite a story. The Wedding-Guest's reaction turns from bemusement to impatience and fear to fascination as the Mariner's story progresses, as can be seen in the language style: for example, Coleridge uses narrative techniques such as personification and repetition to create either a sense of danger, of the supernatural or of serenity, depending on the mood of each of the different parts of the poem⁶.

The Mariner's tale begins with his ship departing on its journey. Despite initial good fortune, the ship is driven south off course by a storm and eventually reaches Antarctica. An albatross (compared to Christian soul) appears and leads them out of the Antarctic, but, even as the albatross is praised by the ship's crew, the Mariner shoots the bird ("with my cross-bow / I shot the albatross"). The crew is angry to the Mariner, believing that the albatross brought the south wind that led them out of the Antarctic. However, the sailors change their minds when the weather becomes warmer and the mist disappears ("Twas right, said they, such birds to slay / that bring the fog and mist"). The crime arouses the wrath of spirits who then pursue the ship "from the land of mist and snow"; the south wind that had initially led them from the land of ice now sends the ship into uncharted waters, where it is becalmed⁷.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.
Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink⁸.

Here, however, the sailors change their minds again and blame the Mariner for the torment of their thirst. In anger, the crew forces the Mariner to wear the dead albatross about his neck, perhaps to illustrate the burden he must suffer from killing it, or perhaps as a sign of regret:

Ah! Well a-day! What evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the albatross
About my neck was hung

Eventually, in a strange passage, the ship encounters a ghostly vessel. On board are Death (a skeleton) and the "Night-mare Life-in-Death" (a deathly-pale woman), who are playing dice for the souls of the crew. With a roll of the dice, Death wins the lives of the crew members and Life-in-Death the life of the Mariner, a prize she considers more valuable. Her name is a clue to the Mariner's fate; he will endure a fate worse than death as punishment for his killing of the albatross⁹.

The Ancient Mariner is the story of a real-life sea voyage pervaded by a supernatural atmosphere¹⁰. There is an eeriness in the hypnotic eyes of the Mariner, the spectral ship with Death and nightmare Life-in Death as its crew dicing on the deck, the winds that sound but never come near, the Polar spirit, the angelic spirits entering the corpses of the mariners and activating them, and the Mariner's ship sinking mysteriously with a thundering sound coming from under the water. Terror is produced by Coleridge's ability to provide visual descriptions of striking vividness¹¹. The story with its supernatural trappings is obviously unbelievable, but within this framework there is the human reality¹².

"God save thee, ancient mariner

From the fiends that plague you thus"¹³.

Here Coleridge vividly presents the supernatural issues by dwelling upon the hideous contortions on the face of the Mariner. And it is by drawing our attention to the terror-stricken feelings manifested on his face that the poet convinces us of the reality of the experience. We would certainly refuse to accept the supernatural details as real, but there is no mistaking the downright inevitable gush of frightful feelings and sensations evoked by the supernatural powers, as when the Mariner says:

"Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
My life blood seemed to sip"¹⁴.

The feelings evoked are very much real. So, Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural is psychological.

The Ancient Mariner, thus, fulfils Coleridge's part of the joint bargain in Lyrical Ballads - to treat subjects "supernatural or at least romantic", but to make them credible by truth to human nature and feeling, so as to cause "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith"¹⁵.

The influence of the supernatural has been brought to bear not only on human nature but on phenomenal Nature also. Coleridge makes the natural seem supernatural by ascribing to Nature something of the special power and proficiency of the supernatural. The storm in part V is like a fantastic death's dance. The tropical sunset comes rushing with a single gigantic stride. Even the ice has got a terrific presence:

"It creaked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound"¹⁶.

The persistence of natural laws in the midst of the supernatural convulsions helps us to retain our grip over reality. And, of course, the figure of the wedding guest is a permanent link with the world of reality¹⁷.

Now, it can be seen how the supernatural elements were the hallmark of the Romantic period. They resorted to the beauty of the Supernatural: Romantic poets believed in the spiritual world which existed beyond the physical.

The essence of Coleridge's romanticism lies in his artistic treatment of the supernatural. All of his three great poems Kubla Khan, Christabel and The Ancient Mariner are poems of pure supernaturalism.

In The Ancient Mariner which is regarded as a masterpiece of supernatural poetry, the supernatural is controlled by thought and study.

The supernatural element in The Ancient Mariner is not a hallucination, or the outcome of remorse by the most sober method. Coleridge's skill in dealing with the supernatural in this poem is two-fold: first, he has fully achieved his aim of making the supernatural appear to be natural; second, he has employed suggestive, psychological, and refined (sophisticated) methods of producing the feelings of mystery and horror in the poem, not crude like that of the writers before him, i.e. Horace, Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, and Monk Lewis.

The greatness of The Ancient Mariner lies chiefly in the technique by which the supernatural has been made believable and convincing. There are, no doubt, a number of impossible, incredible, and fantastic situations in the

poem, such as: the mesmeric (magnetic) power in the mariner's gaze, the sudden appearance of the mysterious skeleton ship, the specter woman and her mate, the coming back to life of the dead crew, the seraph-band making signals to the land, the sudden sinking of the ship, and the polar spirit commenting on or influencing the course of events. But these supernatural phenomena are so skillfully blended with the perfectly believable and natural phenomena that the whole looks real. The sun shining brightly at the outset, the mist and snow, the freezing cold of the polar regions, the floating ice bergs floating in the water, the torrid (very hot) fierceness of stagnant water, the slimy things crawling on the sea, the moon going up the sky, the roaring wind, the rainfall—such are the natural phenomena in the poem.

The realistic effect is enhanced by a description of the state of mind of the ancient mariner; that is; how he tried to pray but he could not, how lonely he felt on a wide, wide sea, how he wanted to die but in vain (useless), how he suffered mental and spiritual anguish (torture).

This psychological study of the mariner adds to the realistic effect because we are made to feel that any man would suffer in the same way under similar circumstances. Again, the details of the ship's voyage have such a diary-like air that we accept them as a faithful recording of facts. There is, too, the logic of cause and effect in the poem. The punishment and torture have a convincing cause behind them.

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1 Ralph Nadir , Biography of Three Romantic Poets (Huston: Magdaline Press, 1986), p 55

2 John Burgess Wilson , English Literature: A Survey for Students (London: Longmans, 1965)p 196

3 Brion Marcel, Art of the Romantic Era(Boston: Henry Holt and Company, Inc, 1996), P 85

4 Marcel, p 25

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- 5 Rajinder Paul , S.T. Coleridge: An Evaluation of his Poetry (New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 2009),
p 22-25
- 6 Marcel, P 92.
- 7 Marcel,p 93-4
- 8 William Keach, The Complete Poems: Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Penguin, 1997)
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- 10 Ibid., p 101
- 11 George Frager, Coleridge's Treatment of the Supernatural in the Ancient Mariner (New York:
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- 12 Frager., 95
- 13 Ibid, p 24
- 14 Keach, p752
- 15 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Viii
- 16 Keach, p.758
- 17 Marcel, P.57.