

**Horrors of the Mariner and His Author:
Boundary-Crossing and the Traumatized
Mariner's Unreliable Testimony in
Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient
Mariner***

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Introduction

Since Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem about the invisible part of our universe is filled with complex symbolism, it is remarkably difficult to come to a consensus about its actual meaning. Coleridge's contemporary "critics were often unable to make 'sense' of [it]" (Haven 366). And even today, interpreting *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*¹ unambiguously remains a difficult task. In his introduction to Emerson's comic-book adaptation of *The Rime*, Shelton utters his own frustration of understanding the poem, claiming that "back in Mrs Teshner's English class" the students "managed to read the thing, but still no one understood it" ([2]). And he goes on, remarking that "no one of any era can agree what it is all about" ([2]).

What most critics have in common however, is that they focus on the Mariner's act of shooting the Albatross, the following punishment for this apparently blasphemous act, and the forgiveness after he blesses the water-snakes. Most influential is Warren's interpretation that these events symbolize the Mariner's "crime and punishment and repentance and reconciliation" (391). Supporting this, Tekinay summarizes that "many critics interpret the poem as a myth of the guilty soul marking in clear stages the passage from crime and punishment to . . . redemption" (186). Furthermore, in one of his lectures, Jung focused on the Albatross's symbolic function as a marker of punishment and forgiveness. Undoubtedly, these symbols are crucial for understanding the Mariner's transition from guilt to redemption.

Perhaps because of this, secondary literature pays less attention to the psychological effects that these events have on the Mariner. In 1800, William Wordsworth already claimed that the Mariner "has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being" (Magnuson 83). And in fact, the reader does learn very little about the Mariner's

¹ Henceforth referred to as "*The Rime*".

psychological motivations in the intradiegetic² level of the narrative. Even though his suffering is repeatedly emphasized, the Mariner never seems to choose his own actions. As noted by Wordsworth, he does “not act but [is constantly] acted upon” (Warren 396). Taking this into account, it does not surprise that the Mariner’s psychology has gotten far less attention than the narrative’s symbolism.

Nevertheless, the poem’s extradiegetic level shows that a look into the Mariner’s psyche can contribute to a richer understanding of the poem. This level of the narrative depicts the Mariner as an old “grey-beard loon” (11) who is remarkably influenced by his experience on the sea. It has deformed him to the extent that he appears monstrous to the Wedding-Guest, and his exceptional behaviour even permits a trauma theory analysis. His recurring urge to tell his tale “at an uncertain hour” (582) resembles descriptions of post-traumatic flashbacks, which partly occur because the experience was so horrifying that it took place “outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 69). Plus, his behaviour matches LaCapra’s theory of “acting out” as “compulsively repeat[ing] in so-called traumatic memory” (“Trauma Studies” 117-118). Therefore, the Mariner’s psychology deserves further exploration, and his traumatized behaviour is potentially a very meaningful aspect of the poem.

There are multiple ways in which trauma and trauma theory are relevant to *The Rime*. The first and most evident example is that the events in the intradiegetic story are traumatic. More precisely, this concerns the Mariner’s crossing of boundaries. His voyage on the ship is essentially an excursion into the unfamiliar, “invisible” part of our universe, where normal logic does not hold up and where otherworldly laws seem to rule. This new realm subjects him to horrifying experiences related to Harpham’s notion of the grotesque and Kristeva’s

² In this paper, “intradiegetic” refers to the Mariner’s story. The term “extradiegetic” will be used to refer to the diegetic level in which the Mariner is telling his tale to the Wedding Guest.

theory of abjection. That these horrifying experiences take place especially when the Mariner ventures into the invisible side of nature, foregrounds the traumatic effect of this boundary-crossing. Secondly, the Mariner's remarkable behaviour is also linked to trauma. His frighteningly compulsive attitude towards the Wedding-Guest, and his obsession with telling his tale illustrate a clear lasting effect of his experience on his psyche. And peculiarly, even contemporary trauma theories, such as LaCapra's concept of "acting out", are applicable to this character in a late eighteenth to early nineteenth century poem. A third way in which trauma is relevant to *The Rime* concerns the unreliability of the Mariner's testimony. Not only is it impossible that the Mariner's experiences – such as meeting Death and Lady Life-in-Death – truly happened, but next to that, the Mariner was probably hallucinating and has no witnesses. This unreliability is linked to trauma theory in the sense that when trauma victims are unable to accurately represent their traumatic experiences, they often resort to alternative metaphorical representations, or, the "hyperbolic aesthetic of the sublime" (LaCapra, "Writing Trauma" 93), much like the Mariner does. This leads to a fourth and last sense in which trauma is relevant to the poem. The Mariner's unreliability could ultimately mean that *The Rime* as a whole should not be taken at face value, but interpreted as an allegory. The traumatized Mariner's unreliable testimony allows the author to give the poem a multi-layered meaning. On a deeper level, *The Rime* can be read as a critique on slavery, in which the shooting of the Albatross represents the enslavement of natives (Kitson 205, Lee 677). But it can also be read as an account of Coleridge's vision of the cosmos, i.e. an organic unity which functions like a "plant", something "organic" in which "the whole is everything, and the parts are nothing" (Abrams 171). Shooting the Albatross, and by extension slavery, then represents a disrespect for this unity and results in a traumatic separation from it. In this sense, trauma allows the author to merge the Mariner's psychology with the allegorical layers of *The Rime*; both revolve around the trauma of a disconnection from the logical, visible universe.

In short, this paper will explore how there is more to *The Rime* than its complex symbolism, and this will be done by analysing the Mariner's story as a traumatic testimony. More specifically, it will consider the relevance of trauma on four levels: the Mariner's boundary-crossing as a traumatic experience, how his trauma leads to a changed behaviour, how it influences the Mariner's unreliable testimony, and why this is of substantial importance for interpreting the allegorical layers of the poem.

1. Boundary-Crossing as a Traumatic Experience

1.1. Stages of boundary-crossing

Arguably, one of the major themes in *The Rime* is boundary-crossing, or a transition from the “visible”³ into the “invisible” part of our universe. This concept of travelling into an alien, invisible realm is consistent with the poem’s epigraph in the 1800 version, which states: “I readily believe that there are more invisible than visible natures in the universe” (Lynch, Stillinger 443n). Hereby, the crucial theme of transgressing the boundaries of our familiar world is already introduced before the onset of the poem.

In the Mariner’s narrative, penetration into the invisible realm is realised in several stages. The first way in which the Mariner subjects himself to the unknown, is simply by taking part in a seafaring voyage, or crossing the boundary between land and sea. And the setting – a ship – also emphasises the theme of transition from a known to an unknown space. As the ship departs, the crew “drop / Below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the light house top” (22-24), and hereby leave the signs of civilization. They even cross “the equator” (Lynch, Stillinger 444n); a literal boundary which emphasises this transition. Thus, the concept of boundary-crossing is inherently present in the theme of a seafaring voyage.

That the newly entered realm is an unfamiliar one is soon made clear by the Mariner’s descriptions. He characterises it especially by its “mist and snow” (51), which obstruct visibility and therefore link the realm to the epigraph’s “invisible Natures” (443n). The Mariner also describes that there were “Nor shapes of men nor beasts [he] ken [knew]” (57). And moreover, the gloss underscores that this is “the land of ice, and of fearful sounds where

³ This paper uses the term “visible” to refer to the world as we perceive it its everyday form. “Invisible” on the other hand refers to the part of the world that we do normally not perceive. This realm is characterised by, for example, different or even absent laws of causality and is much like the “supernatural”. The terms “visible” and “invisible” are taken from the English translation (Lynch, Stillinger 443n) of the poem’s epigraph by Thomas Burnet.

no living thing was to be seen” (55). Additionally, the moon is increasingly present in the Mariner’s narrative. The latter is especially important because this moon functions as “Coleridge’s half-light” that “changes the familiar world”, as opposed to the sun, “which shows the familiar as familiar” (Warren 13-14, 19). In this way, the moon again emphasises that the Mariner is no longer in the everyday empirical world.

A much stronger disconnection from the familiar world occurs after the Mariner shoots the Albatross. Essentially, this bird can be read as the symbol that still connects the mariners with the familiar visible world. The fact that it is the equilibrium or link between the visible and the invisible, is signalled in several ways. Firstly, the Albatross is able to “cross . . . Thorough the fog” (63-64), and can thus freely venture between visible and invisible realms. Secondly, the bird is the one who makes “The ice split”, which would have allowed the mariners to escape the alien world. And thirdly, the moral at the end states that “he prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man *and bird* and beast” (613, emphasis added). The Albatross is the one between, and thus linking man (the familiar visible realm) and beast (the unfamiliar invisible realm). Al-Rashid noted that by shooting the Albatross, the Mariner destroys the centre of all things and hereby instigates chaos (63). In other words, he has destroyed the link with familiar logic. This interpretation is supported by the fact that after this deed, the sun – conventionally a key symbol of the visible universe – hides itself “in mist” (85). By shooting the Albatross, the Mariner further symbolically disconnects himself from the visible world.

Things get even worse when the whole crew justify this crime. After they exclaim that “‘Twas right . . . such birds to slay” (101), they are subjected to utter silence, horrible drought and a lack of wind, resulting in a complete stasis (107-110). The sun, which represents the logical visible universe, now further removes itself from the mariners, as it is now “No bigger than the Moon” (114). Hence, the crew’s disrespect for the Albatross causes an even further

disconnection from the visible world, as they now cannot count on its usual wind and rain and therefore cannot even move.

This separation reaches its climax after the Mariner insults the water-snakes as “slimy things” in a rotting sea (123-125). As a result of this repeated insult to the universe, the Mariner causes the crew to be “plagued” by a “spirit” (132) and they soon meet the spectre-ship. That this means the climax of the crew’s subjection to the invisible unfamiliar world, becomes clear when they encounter “Death” himself (188) and the woman “Life-in-Death” (193), and especially when these figures literally gamble for the crew’s souls. The latter is significant because it exemplifies that “man is at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces” (Tekinay 187). The absence of logic in these forces illustrates the dangers of being subjected to the invisible realm.

Clearly, the Mariner crosses a crucial boundary from the visible into the invisible part of the universe. This is not done consciously, but through a lack of respect for the visible realm’s creatures. While it is true that the sea is a perfect setting for this transition, several symbolic acts of disconnection are necessary before the Mariner can be fully submerged into this otherworldly territory.

1.2. The trauma of boundary-crossing

1.2.1. General horror and anxiety

Boundary-crossing is particularly relevant to the Mariner’s trauma, because it subjects him to terror and horror. Notably, the more the Mariner is exposed to the invisible realm, the more horrifying his experiences become. Most prominent are the personified Death and lady Life-in-Death who make his “life-blood seem[] to sip” (202-205). But the Mariner also describes the “Four times fifty living men” who “dropped down one by one” (216, 219), their disturbing corpses (253-260), the “rotting sea” (240), the “rotting deck” (242), “a thousand thousand

slimy things” (238), “A wicked whisper” making his “heart as dry as dust” (246-247), the cursing looks of the dead crew (260), and he has a rotting albatross around his neck. All this is of course pure nightmare fuel.

What catalyses this terror into traumatic horror, is the Mariner’s sense of complete separation and loneliness. He is on the sea beyond all markers of civilization, alone since all of his crewmates have died, lacks the ability to pray (244), and is without hope of reaching home anytime soon because there is literally no wind in his sails. In his own words, he is “Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea”, without any “saint [to take] pity on / [His] soul in agony” (234-235). Jung explains that the Mariner is completely helpless, “caught in a limbo of stasis and paralysis” (228), and Lee notes that he is “disconnected from his environment, from himself, and from other people” (692). She goes on, summarizing that “[t]his kind of disconnection is truly a nightmare” (692). Considering this, it is clear that boundary-crossing, or the separation from the visible world, will turn out to be traumatic.

1.2.2. The Grotesque

The precise cause of the Mariner’s trauma can be further illuminated by applying the theory of the “grotesque” to his experience. According to Harpham, the definition of this concept is necessarily vague (461), but it does have some main characteristics. Most notably, a story that introduces the grotesque “must begin with . . . certain aesthetic conventions which the reader feels are representative of reality as he knows it”, but then “shatter [these] conventions by opening onto vertiginous new perspectives characterized by the destruction of logic” (462). He also cites Wolfgang Kayser: in the grotesque, “our world . . . ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world” (462). After the Mariner shoots the Albatross, his experiences match Harpham’s explanation of the grotesque perfectly. He is

subjected to arbitrary forces and finds himself in a horrifying universe that is void of any logic as he knows it.

Harpham also lists some more explicit features of the grotesque. A first example is that it often includes “jungle vegetation” in its setting because of “its ominous vitality, in which nature itself seems to have erased the difference between plants and animals” (462). Even though *The Rime* does not take place in the jungle, the *sea* does have the same property in the sense that it blurs the difference between the water and the “water-snakes” (273). Sometimes, the grotesque is also manifested through physical conditions (462). Again, this can be applied to the Mariner, since an important part of his horror is his inability to speak, and this (physical) condition can only be broken by (physical) self-mutilation, i.e. biting his arm and sucking his own blood⁴. The grotesque is also found in alienation by “physical deformity” (465). In *The Rime*, this is most notable on the deepest level of boundary-crossing: when the crew meet lady Life-in-Death. This figure is characterised by a skin that is “as white as *leprosy*” (192, emphasis added), which – just like her name – represents the horrifying paradox of living disintegration. What these characteristics of *The Rime* and the grotesque have in common, is that they subvert reality as we know it. Collapsing all boundaries, they mix sea and snakes, survival and self-mutilation, life and death, and make us question our former view of a knowable, controlled world.

1.2.3. *The Abject*

In that sense, the grotesque imagery of *The Rime* also closely resembles what Kristeva calls “the abject”. In *Powers of Horror*, she refers to this concept as something that is “radically excluded”, driven away by the “superego” because it “does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game” and thus contains the danger of drawing us “toward the place where

⁴ The moisture of the blood grants him a temporary restoration of his speech faculty.

meaning collapses” (2). When we are confronted with something abject, the body reacts with “spasms and vomiting” (2) to protect us.

As illustrated in chapter 1.1, the Albatross in the Mariner’s tale is the symbol that connects the visible and invisible world. Because of its “invisible” aspect, it seems *alien* to the Mariner, or even abject and dangerous since it does not completely agree with the rules of his visible world. The Mariner’s impulsive reaction of shooting the bird is then strongly analogous to the “spasms and vomiting” which Kristeva describes.

However, the fundamental paradox of *The Rime* is that such abjection is not at all the right way to deal with the abject. The moral is that we must love all creatures, known or unknown, familiar or abject. Therefore, shooting the Albatross (abject) and cursing the water-snakes (abject) only results in a further disconnection from the visible world, and consequently means a further subjection to the invisible world (abject) which is what the Mariner originally meant to avoid. It is especially after shooting the bird that he is further “draw[n] . . . toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). He is confronted with, for example, Death and Life-in-Death *gambling* for his soul, an event that lacks any knowable meaning. The only way to escape the abject in *The Rime*, is by fully embracing it and no longer experiencing it as abject. In perfect harmony with this paradox, the Mariner is only forgiven after he blesses the snakes which he at first perceived as abject.

In summary, the Mariner’s experience draws its traumatizing power not only from grotesque images that shatter conventional logic by fusing the familiar with the unfamiliar, but also from the fact that a natural reaction to the abject no longer functions as a protective one, but rather as a dangerous one that leads to further subjection to the grotesque and abject.

2. The Mariner's Traumatized Behaviour

2.1. Hints of an impending trauma and an altered perception

Next to portraying the horrifying events, the Mariner's intradiegetic story also hints at the trauma that awaits the Mariner. A first example of this is the "Second Voice" explaining that "The [Mariner] hath penance done, / And *penance more will do*" (408-409, emphasis added). In other words; the experiences horrify the Mariner as they occur, but they will also keep horrifying him in the future. Furthermore, even after the Mariner's curse is broken, he still feels that "a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread" (450-451), which signals that the disturbing events have not left him in peace. And even though the dead crew's horrible cursing look has disappeared, he still feels that "The Albatross's blood" is not gone and needs to be "wash[ed] away" by the Hermit (512-513). This does not mean that the Mariner has not yet been forgiven, or that he has not yet made up for his crime. In fact, his guilt symbolically sank along with his ship, "like lead"⁵ (549) into the sea. It rather means that he has become traumatized: his guilt is gone, but the horrifying experience remains to haunt him.

This interpretation is further supported by the Mariner's altered perception of his homeland. When he returns to his country, he is back in his familiar environment, but he literally sees it in a different light. When he departed, he saw his country in the light of the sun, but when he returns, he sees it in the light of the moon. This moon, as has been pointed out, functions as "Coleridge's half-light" that "changes the familiar world" (Warren 13-14). On the Mariner's return, the moon submerges everything: "on the bay the moonlight lay, / And the shadow of the moon" (474-475), "The moonlight steeped in silentness / The steady weathercock" (478-479), and "the bay was white with silent light", giving birth to "Full many shapes, that shadows were" (480-482). And even though the Mariner is supposed to be back

⁵ The poem links "lead", with guilt. Another example is the Albatross around the Mariner's neck as a symbol of guilt, which also fell "like lead into the sea" (291) after the Mariner was forgiven.

in the visible world, he can still see supernatural beings such as “seraph-m[e]n” (490). In other words; he has left the invisible world, but his experience has permanently marked his perception of things and this shows us that the invisible world has not left him.

2.2. The Mariner’s altered appearance and personality

That the invisible world has permanently marked and traumatized the Mariner, is then further illustrated by the extradiegetic level of the poem. The Mariner’s extraordinary character is implicitly signalled by his habit of seizing random strangers to tell them his tale, but the Wedding-Guest also makes it explicit when he describes the Mariner as a “grey-beard loon” (11) with a “glittering eye” (3). Note that his eye before the experience is characterised as “weary” (146), and that the fact that it “is changed into a ‘bright’ and ‘glittering’ eye . . . reflects [his] enlightened state of mind” (Jung 233). The Wedding-Guest thus signals the enlightening and transforming impact of the experience on the Mariner’s appearance.

As a result, the Mariner not only appears frightening to the Wedding-Guest, but there is also a clear link between his appearance and his experience. Firstly, the Wedding-Guest exclaims:

I fear thee, ancient Mariner!
 I fear thy skinny hand!
 And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
 As is the ribbed sea-sand (224-227).

This shows that the Mariner has literally taken over the physical characteristics of the sea on which the trauma was instigated. Secondly, he has also absorbed Life-in-Death’s hybrid personality of life and death. Like the leprotic lady, he does not seem fully alive. He repeatedly has to assure the Wedding-Guest that his body “dropt not down” (231), and even he himself was once convinced that he “was a blessed ghost” (308). Thirdly, absorption of the

invisible realm is also emphasised by the Mariner's utterances that "a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; *and so did I*" (238-239, emphasis added) and that "We were a ghastly crew" (340, emphasis added). This discourse highlights that the Mariner now identifies himself with his horrifying experience. He has lived amongst the otherworldly, and this experience has now become a part of himself.

2.3. The Mariner's behaviour as related to trauma theory

2.3.1. Symptoms

Of course, there is more to the Mariner's transformation than simply becoming what nature wants him to be. While it is true that he goes about like a prophet proclaiming that one must love all universe's creatures, he also bears significant symptoms of trauma. No matter how enlightening his experience might have been, being forced to absorb the abject as a part of one's self evidently comes at a toll: "[h]e is rescued eventually but has only survived in order to relate his tale and to re-narrate compulsively what he has experienced. In the end, the bodies of the dead that finally sink with the ship are not laid to rest" (Jung 229). The Mariner does not turn out to be a prophet, but a martyr.

Traumatic experiences are usually repressed in the unconscious, but they always find their way back to the surface, and there are several ways in which this can occur. Summarized by Kristeva, this happens by means of "modifications, either of speech (parapraxes, etc.), or of the body (symptoms), or both (hallucinations, etc.)" (7). When the Mariner is telling his story, he strongly resembles someone who is hallucinating and shows both modifications of speech and body. His speech is "forced" (580) and compulsive to the extent that it frightens the Wedding-Guest (345). And next to that, there are clear bodily symptoms such as his "woful agony" (583) and "burn[ing] heart" (585).

These symptoms are entertainingly visualized in Emerson's parodying comic-book adaptation of *The Rime*. Below, *Figure 1* shows Emerson's depiction of the Mariner's compulsive speech, which here does not really seem to have the purpose of narrating, but rather that of channelling trauma. *Figure 2* shows his bodily spasms that are assumed to occur when he feels the "woful agony" that compels him "to begin [his] tale" (579-580). *Figure 3* stresses that the Mariner is not an ordinary man, but really a mad trauma victim. Note that Emerson's illustrations are of course meant comically, but that they do make perfect sense in regular interpretations. These depictions of the Mariner as a madman match the concept of traumatic modifications in speech and body, and further emphasise that the Mariner's traumatized behaviour is worth investigating.

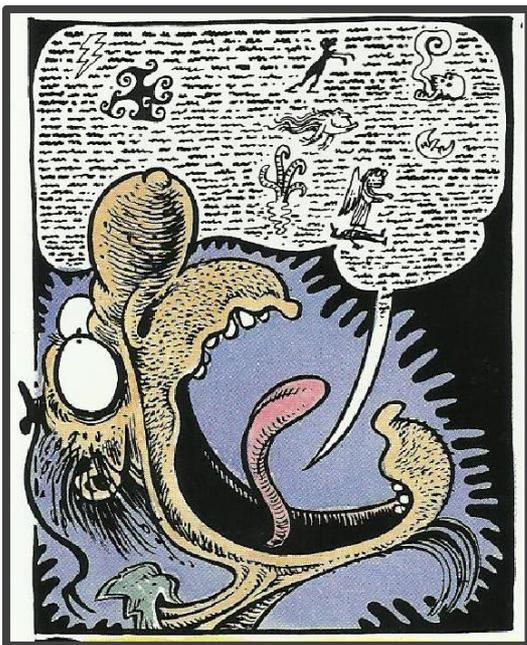


Figure 1: compulsive speech (Emerson [58])

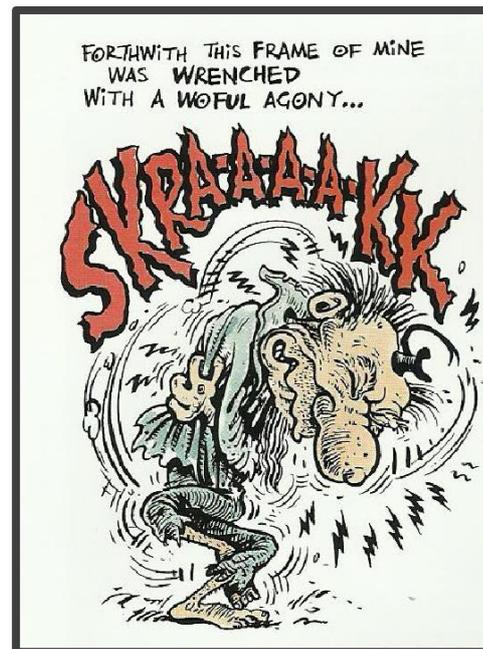


Figure 2: obsessive bodily movements (Emerson [58])



Figure 3: mad trauma victim (Emerson [58])

Particularly relevant here, are the trauma theories by Laub and LaCapra. These two scholars study the traumatic testimonies of Holocaust victims, and curiously, their findings are applicable to the Mariner in *The Rime*. One important insight of trauma theory is that *narration* plays a crucial role in “working through”, or learning to deal with trauma (LaCapra, “Trauma Studies” 118). Laub explains that holocaust survivors for example, “did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story” and this “can become itself an all-consuming life-task” (“Truth and Testimony” 63, emphasis in original). Remarkably, this is what the Mariner is going through. He too has a compelling urge which “force[s]” him to tell his tale (580), and his name – an *Ancient* Mariner – indicates that he must have had this urge for quite a while, i.e. that it has become “an all-consuming life-task”.

The fact that he has been telling his tale for a very long time, shows us that the Mariner is not able to properly deal with his trauma, and that re-narrating here does not necessarily have a healing effect. Laub established that narrating does not always help people to deal with their trauma, but that “the act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price

of speaking is *re-living*; not relief, but further retraumatization” (“Bearing Witness” 67, emphasis in original). Clearly, this is the case for the Mariner, who is constantly urged “to *relive* his tale” (Stockholder 41, emphasis added). In LaCapra’s terms, this means that the Mariner is symptomatically “acting out” his trauma: the traumatic experiences are compulsively repeated while this does not lead to healing (“Trauma Studies” 107, 121). In other words, he fails to move from *Erlebnis* (experiencing the events, “acting out”) to *Erfahrung* (having experienced the events, “working through”), with the result that he keeps “act[ing] out or compulsively repeat[ing]” his trauma in the “so-called traumatic memory” which is here his tale (“Trauma Studies” 117). Also note that the Mariner’s urge to tell his story is even comparable to posttraumatic flashbacks, in the sense that it takes him back to the experience unexpectedly and against his will; “at an uncertain hour” (582) and “forced” (580), causing “a woful agony” (579). The telling that should help him to deal with his past only keeps him stuck in it.

This acting out of the Mariner’s trauma does not only manifest itself in compulsively telling the tale, but also in his general behaviour. He was traumatized by a disconnection from the visible universe, and now seems to be overcompensating for this. When he returns home, he “celebrates the chain of love which binds human society together, and the universe” (Warren 422). But he does this obsessively and considers a connection with the universe far more important than a connection with the people around him. When he keeps the Wedding-Guest from the marriage feast, he disrupts social harmony in order to proclaim harmony with the universe. He even states that it is “sweeter far to [him]” to “all together pray” than to be at a “marriage-feast”, and that it is important that “each to his great Father bends” when doing so (601-607). But even though they do it “all together”, prayer is meant to be a solitary experience, “each to his” own God. Through his obsession with love for the universe, the traumatized Mariner actually forgets to be truly connected to those around him. His experi-

ence on the sea has given him insight, but the acting out, the supplementary obsession, prohibits a right execution of it and shows us that the Mariner is stuck in acting out his trauma.

Even the Wedding-Guest's behaviour makes sense in trauma theory. According to Laub, the depictions in a traumatic testimony can have a great impact on the hearer, and therefore it is often necessary for listeners to "maintain a sense of safety" ("Bearing Witness" 72). In order to realise this, they resort to a series of "listening defenses" (72). One of these that is relevant here, is the "sense of total paralysis"⁶ (72) because it matches the fact that the Wedding-Guest is completely entranced by the Mariner. A footnote by the editors even explains that "the Mariner has gained control of the will of the Wedding-Guest by hypnosis" (Lynch, Stillinger 444n) and thus renders him completely paralyzed. Another relevant listening defence here is the "flood of awe and fear"⁷ (72). The Wedding-Guest repeatedly expresses his "awe and fear" towards the Mariner, especially after hearing that he has been in contact with the dead bodies of the crew (224) or when he thinks that the Mariner has stood among the animated ghosts of the dead crew (345). Through his sense of paralysis and by expressing his awe and fear, the Wedding-Guest acknowledges the extraordinariness of the Mariner's experiences and hereby distances himself from them.

In summary, there are several ways in which *The Rime* can be linked to the symptoms of trauma as discussed in contemporary theory. Firstly, the Mariner's resurfacing trauma is linked to the idea that repressed memories resurface through alterations in compulsive speech and obsessive, spastic bodily behaviour. Secondly, his obsession with telling his tale is related to LaCapra's theory of "acting out" and thus compulsively reliving traumatic memory.

⁶ "A sense of total paralysis, brought about by the threat of flooding—by the fear of merger with the atrocities being recounted" (Laub 72).

⁷ "A flood of awe and fear; we endow the survivor with a kind of sanctity, both to pay our tribute to him and to keep him at a distance, to avoid the intimacy entailed in the knowing" (Laub 72).

Thirdly, “acting out” is also to be found in the Mariner’s obsession with praying and loving the universe, because his neurotic behaviour, linked to the traumatic experiences, stands in the way of social interaction. And fourthly, the Wedding-Guest’s reactions to the Mariner’s narrative include “listening defences” that are found in the behaviour of people listening to traumatic testimonies.

2.3.2. *Cause and Cure*

Not only the Mariner’s symptoms of trauma, but also their cause and possible cure are linked to Laub and LaCapra’s theories. According to Laub, trauma victims experience “repetitions and reenactments” of the events because they, “although real”, were so alienating and overwhelming that they “took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time” (“Bearing Witness” 69). Therefore, they have “no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (69). In other words, the events have not yet been completed and the mind is still trying to grasp them, by reliving them.

Arguably, this is the case for the Mariner. Not only does he have the symptoms caused by this issue, but this theory is also closely related to the origins of his trauma. Ultimately, the Mariner’s trauma is caused by a disconnection from the visible universe and its physical laws, and therefore it is no stretch to assume that his experience was void of the aforementioned “causality, sequence, place and time”. Grow has already argued that the Mariner’s story is “unlocalized in either space or time” (25). And, as illustrated in the first chapter of this paper, shooting the Albatross results in a destruction of the visible universe’s logic. After this vital act the crew can no longer count on the natural wind and rain, the sun representing the logic of the visible universe has forsaken them, and arbitrariness reaches its peak when Death and Life-in-Death literally *gamble* for the souls of the crew. Moreover, Warren has argued that the act of shooting itself also took place “outside the chains of cause and effect” (396). Therefore,

the lack of physical laws in traumatic experiences is clearly linked to what the Mariner has been through. It explains why his mind is stuck inside these events, or why he “uncontrollably relive[s]” the past, “as if there were no difference between it and the present” (LaCapra, “Trauma Studies” 119).

Since the cause of traumatic symptoms is that the events were experienced “outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 69), their cure partly consists of “undo[ing] this entrapment”, and understanding what happened, *within* normal reality’s parameters (57). This is done by “constructing a narrative”, telling the traumatic experience “to another outside oneself and then tak[ing] it back again, inside” (57). The point of this is to finally understand one’s own story. By making a version of the story, projecting it onto a listener, and then witnessing one’s own testimony through this listener who reflects it, one has the chance to grasp the events more fully, i.e. within the laws and boundaries of the normal (visible) world. Consequently, this should help to “cure” the posttraumatic symptoms. The Mariner however fails in this process. He tells his tale, but the listener is a completely passive, paralyzed hearer, and does not reflect the story back to the trauma victim. The Mariner “teach[es]” (590) the Wedding-Guest his tale, but this is a one-way form of communication that does not allow him to reread his own experiences through the listener. As a result, it does not help him to undo his “entrapment”. And in trauma theory, it therefore makes sense that he is destined to stay traumatized, no matter how many times he tells his tale.

3. An Unreliable Traumatic Testimony

3.1. *The Mariner's unreliable tale*

Even though the Wedding-Guest remarkably never questions the reliability of the Mariner's tale, this in no way means that the reader should take his tale for granted. In fact, there are many reasons not to. This paper distinguishes them into three major categories: the unreliable narrator, the story's allusions to fictionality, and the mediations in recounting the experience⁸.

3.1.1. *The "grey-beard loon" as an unreliable narrator*

That the Ancient Mariner is not the most reliable source is noticeably signalled through his altered state of consciousness in the intradiegetic story. One clear example is that he starts hallucinating and hearing voices after he "fell down in a swoon" (391-392). His unreliable state is also stressed by the gloss, which explains that the Mariner "hath been cast into a trance" (422). And in fact, critics have argued that he might have been hallucinating during the whole experience. Al-Rashid proposes that the Mariner was probably in a "psychic state/place of hallucination/madness" because of the "thirst and heat" (65). And Grow also notes that the encounter with "the supernatural" can be explained by the extreme heat and drought, "a circumstance which hints strongly of exposure-induced delerium [*sic*]" (25). Hence, there are strong indications that the Mariner was not in the most reliable mental state during his experience.

⁸ These categories are inspired by characteristics of "postmemory" fiction in which unreliability is a major concern. Codde distinguishes 1) mediation and layering, 2) references to mythology, 3) unreliable narrators, 4) quest motifs and the poetics of absence, and 5) failure of language, as strategies that emphasise unreliability in postmemory fiction. This paper discusses the first three of these characteristics in *The Rime*, but by no means argues that Coleridge's poem is postmemory (which would be absurd). The only aim here is to show that the Mariner's narrative is not to be taken for granted.

Next to that, there are no other witnesses that can confirm the Mariner's testimony. Since all his crewmates have died, he is the sole survivor. The poem clearly highlights this issue, when the Mariner exclaims that he is "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!" (232-234). Furthermore, the corpses of the crew and all other evidence that the events have ever taken place disappear along with the ship when it sinks. And Coleridge himself even "suggest[ed] that the sinking of the ship in the presence of the pilot and the hermit may have been an error", literally stating that "[t]here should have been no other witnesses of the truth of any part of the tale, but the 'Ancient Mariner' himself" (Haven 364). All this indeed indicates that the Mariner is not meant to be a reliable narrator.

3.1.2. The Mariner's tale as a tale and mythology

The unreliability of the Mariner's tale is further enhanced by the repeated allusions to the fictional nature of stories. The most evident example here is that the Mariner's account is referred to as a "tale", both in the poem (580, 584, 590) and in the gloss (13). Of course, the word "tale" here not only means "a story", but especially "an untrue story; a lie" (Cambridge Online Dictionary). Next to that, the poem also draws attention to fictionality through its references to mythology. There are repeated allusions to Christian myth: the Albatross is referred to as "a Christian soul" (65), this Albatross is hung around the Mariner's neck "Instead of the cross" (142), and there are also the "seraph[s]" (490), the "kind saint" (284), and the "Mary Queen" (293). Furthermore, critics have extensively argued that there are links between the (wandering) Mariner and the myths of the Wandering Jew, Cain, and the Flying Dutchman (Grow 3, Hillier 7, Fulmer 797). The clear link between the Mariner's tale and other fictional stories suggests that we should not read his narrative as a true story either.

3.1.3. Mediations in recounting the experience

Finally, the unreliable status of the Mariner's testimony is also stressed by the numerous mediations between the actual events and how they are recounted by the Mariner or interpreted by the reader. To start with, the reader will never know the events as they really occurred, because the Mariner's hallucinating state already separates him one level from the events at the moment of perception. The narrative then further distances itself from these events in the sense that they are recalled in retrospect, by an *Ancient* Mariner recounting them from an old and unreliable memory. Moreover, there is the distinction between the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels of the narrative. The reader has no direct access to the intradiegetic level, but only to the tale as it is narrated on the extradiegetic level to the Wedding-Guest. As a result, the reader is trying to understand what happened to the Mariner, by reading how he narrates the events to the Wedding-Guest, as he remembers them from his unreliable memory, while he was not even thinking straight at the time when they occurred.

Actually, the poem consciously draws our attention to this issue of mediation. When it was first published in *Lyrical Ballads*, "it was in a self-conscious archaic form" (Jones). As claimed by Wordsworth, "the old words and the strangeness of it" even "deterred readers from going on" (Jones). Important here is that in being deterred, these readers must have been very much aware of the fact that they were trying to interpret a fictional text, not an actual testimony. And Coleridge strongly enhanced this feeling when he added the glosses in the 1800 edition. That the glosses draw attention to the poem's textuality, has already been illustrated by Grow. He remarks that they "emphasise the remoteness, not the clarity, of the story" and lead to "the same challenge that we have in reading *The Sound and the Fury* or *Pale Fire*; separating wheat from chaff in what we are told" (27). The glosses are by no means a help for understanding the poem. Much rather, they make the readers switch from poem to gloss and from gloss to poem, showing them their own struggle of interpreting rather

than helping them with it. This adds to the mediated nature of the testimony, in the sense that it emphasises that the already much layered narrative is now also read and interpreted by the reader of a text, and thus an additional step further away from the original events.

3.2. Unreliability and traumatic testimony

Having established that the Mariner's testimony is unreliable, it is important to pose the question why this must be so. Again, a link with contemporary trauma theory is not far-fetched. Like the Mariner's experience, traumatic memories are quite peculiar in the sense that they concern events which were so overwhelming that they "took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 69). Evidently, this has crucial implications for their recall.

As is the case with Dori Laub, the victim can often remember the events "in minute detail", or with their "explicit details", "beyond the normal capacity for recall" ("Truth and Testimony" 61-62). This, however, does not mean that traumatic memory always infallibly retains the events as they occurred. Often it is quite the contrary, and "[t]he horror of the historical experience is maintained in the testimony only as an elusive memory that feels as if it no longer resembles any reality. The horror is, indeed, compelling not only in its reality but even more so, in its flagrant subversion of reality" (Laub, "Truth and Testimony" 62). This is applicable to *The Rime* in the sense that the Mariner is fully convinced of his horrible experiences, while these are in no way consistent with reality (the visible realm) but rather with a very distorted version thereof (the invisible realm), and this only enhances the horrifying effect of these experiences.

Even more important for an analysis of Coleridge's poem, is LaCapra's claim that when victims fail to deal with their trauma, the "unrepresentable excess in traumatic limit events" can "lead to a construction of these events in terms of [a] . . . hyperbolic aesthetic of

the sublime or even a (positive or negative) sacralisation of the event” (LaCapra, “Writing Trauma” 93, brackets in original). In fact, this quotation can be interpreted as the reason for everything that has thus far been argued in this paper. It illustrates perfectly why the Mariner can be testifying true events and sound like a madman at the same time. He has experienced truly traumatizing events, beyond the visible universe, but the precise nature of these happenings remains unknown to the reader, for the exact reason that they were too overwhelming for the Mariner to grasp and represent in the first place. In order to express the horror which he truly felt, he does resort to the aforesaid “hyperbolic aesthetic of the sublime”. Most of the main transition moments in his tale are clear examples of this: entering the remarkably alien realm, the crew hanging the dead Albatross around his neck, meeting Death and Life-in-Death, the descriptions of the rotting sea, and so forth. That the Mariner sacralises the experience is clear as well, since he links an explicit sentimental moral to his tale; that “He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small” (614-615). Somehow, he has convinced himself that his traumatic experience is something sacred, a moral lesson that he needed and from which he has learned.

In this way, the unreliability of the Mariner’s testimony is not a random feature of *The Rime*, but one that is clearly consistent with the Mariner as a trauma victim. It does not decrease the value of his tale, but rather emphasises that his experience was truly overwhelming. It clarifies why the intradiegetic level is so distorted and linked to the hyperbolic sublime, which is in this case full of symbolism. Plus, it explains why the Mariner interprets his experience as something sacred and moralising. And ultimately, it makes us wonder what really happened to the Mariner, what the events looked like before they were converted into the sublime versions that we can find in *The Rime*. In other words, it makes us wonder what sort of experience is so horrifying that it allows the author of *The Rime* to write an allegorical poem about it.

4. The Story's Multi-Layered Meaning and its Relation to the Author

4.1. The expressive theory of art

The Rime was written well before Roland Barthes proclaimed *The Death of the Author* in 1967, and there are good reasons to look for a link between the Mariner and his author. This is especially the case since Coleridge's poem is a Romantic work, and strongly linked to "expressive theory", which postulates that:

A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined output of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind (Abrams 22).

The fact that Coleridge himself usually took into account "the mental process which evolved [a poem]", and upheld the idea "[t]hat a writer reveals his moral character in his art" (Abrams 171, 229) then invites, if not forces, us to consider Coleridge's thoughts when he was writing *The Rime*. Ultimately, it means that the Mariner's trauma could be strongly linked to what the author was most appalled by.

4.2. Coleridge's poem and unity in the universe

1.2.1. Coleridge and unity in the universe

When considering the relevance of Coleridge's biography for *The Rime*, there is one central element that must not be overlooked: unity in the universe. This concept is crucial for understanding why the Mariner's disconnection from the visible universe is so horrifying. As a start, this short paragraph will briefly discuss the general concept of unity in Coleridge's philosophy.

Coleridge wrote that:

In the world we see every where evidences of a Unity, which the component parts are so far from explaining, that they necessarily pre-suppose it as the cause and condition of their existing *as* those parts; or even of their existing at all. . . . That the root, stem, leaves, petals, &c. [of this crocus] cohere to one plant, is owing to an antecedent Power or Principle in the Seed, which existed before a particle of the matters that constitute the *size* and visibility of the crocus, had been attracted from the surrounding soul, air, and moisture (Abrams 171, emphasis, ellipsis and brackets in original).

The universe thus forms a unity, in which the synergy between the parts is much more important than the parts themselves. A root, for example, has no value as a root, but only as the root of a plant. And the plant does not originate because its component parts are randomly lumped together. Rather, the parts originate and are the way they are because of their relation to the whole. The same system applies to the whole world.

Put in another way, the world is a harmonious “organic unity”. In Coleridge’s theory, a *mechanic* unity represents but a collection of separate parts, while an *organic* unity is a system in which “the whole is everything, and the parts are nothing” (Abrams 171). Coleridge does not limit this principle to biological phenomena, but sees “organic unity . . . as a fact of the *universe*” (Hocks 73, emphasis added). He was influenced by the Neoplatonic doctrine that there is a “‘sympathy’ among the elements of the universe”, a “unity of the cosmos”, and an “interdependence of the parts that constitute it” (Flores 185-186). In other words, Coleridge’s view on the universe was marked by the idea that everything and everyone is strongly

interrelated, and that actions of the world's parts should be in harmony with their organic whole.

1.2.2. The Mariner and unity in the universe

The weary-eyed Mariner's crime is essentially one of ignorance: when he shoots the Albatross, he as a particle of the visible world violates another particle of the visible world, without realising that they both are part of the same whole. In other words, he acts as a particle in a mechanic unity. And if the poem teaches us anything, it is that we must act to the norms of an organic unity. We must love "All things both great and small" (615), because what we do to other particles, affects the unity, and the unity affects us.

The Mariner fails to realise this, and the results are radical; he is excommunicated from the unity. This basically matches the previous explanation of boundary-crossing from the visible into the invisible world. The visible world represents an organic one, whereas the invisible world represents a mechanic one. Failing to see the unity between parts, the Mariner is expelled from the organic world into a mechanic realm where unity between parts does not matter. This means that he can shoot at birds as much as he wants now, but it also means that he can no longer benefit from this organic unity. He cannot use the wind to move, he cannot use the rain to drink, and he is subjected to grotesque and abject forces, such as arbitrary punishments by Death and lady Life-in-Death. The only way to regain access to the unity, is by becoming a bright-eyed enlightened mariner who appreciates all the universe's component parts. This transition is indeed symbolized by blessing the water-snakes. Violation of the organic unity results in a separation from it, and appreciation leads to a reintegration in it.

Since the disconnection related to Coleridge's philosophy severely traumatizes the Mariner, it might tell us something about the author's own anxieties. According to Harpham, "[e]ach age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity"

(463). In *The Rime*, this sense of humanity is especially endangered by a disconnection from the organic whole, and being subjected to an arbitrary, soulless, mechanic chaos. Even without conflating the voice of the Mariner with that of the author, it makes sense to say that the author feared such disconnection.

4.3. Coleridge's poem and anti-slavery

4.3.1. An abolitionist's poem

A second fact in Coleridge's biography relevant to *The Rime*, is that he dreaded the horrors of slavery. This is clear from the fact that he was an abolitionist and gave a public lecture on the issue. In *On the Slave Trade*, he describes the horrible conditions on slave-vessels, articulates the enormous guilt of the Europeans who would become responsible for the death of 180 million slaves, and he warns them for God's retribution (108-110).

Taking this into account, it need not surprise that several critics link *The Rime* to the slave trade. Empson claimed that the poem is especially about "the maritime expansion of colonial powers and their subsequent guilt at their treatment of other civilizations" (Kitson 205). And Lee has convincingly argued that Coleridge's poem depicts the yellow fever, which "itself became intimately tied to the physical and philosophical effects of slavery" (676). These indications show us that (anti-)slavery is an important aspect of *The Rime*, and that this might be crucial for analysing the Mariner's trauma of boundary-crossing or separation from the organic unity.

4.3.2. Slavery in the organic unity

Coleridge's aversion to slavery is linked to his view on the universe. For example, his idea of organic unity explains why he gave up his "hope for improvement by political action" against the government (Kitson 202). In Coleridge's view, the British only got "the government they deserve[d]" for partaking in vulgar actions such as slavery (Kitson 202), and Coleridge even

feared that these crimes of his nation would be severely punished by Providence (Kitson 203). A corrupted government and the possibility of divine retribution are natural consequences or punishments when a particle misbehaves in an organic world, by for example profiting from slavery. There would be little consequences in a mechanic universe, because in such universe, one part harming the other does not significantly harm the whole. In an organic universe on the other hand, slavery means that one imposes a cruel deed on the people that one is related to and who thus stand in a relation to the same whole as the instigator. Consequently, enslavers influence the laws above them, and punishment by Providence makes far more sense.

4.3.3. *Shooting birds as enslavement*

In order to argue that slavery is related to the Mariner's trauma, it should be defined in what sense he encounters it. The poem gives no overt representations of slavery, but it does have a remarkable occurrence of injustice: the Mariner shooting the Albatross. This act represents a destructive disrespect for other creatures, and can hereby be linked to slavery. In this reading, the Mariner as a white coloniser inflicts unjustified cruelty on the Albatross as an enslaved people⁹.

The moral message of *The Rime* is of course that such sins will be paid for. Even though the Mariner survives, his condition is arguably worse than death. As discussed earlier in this paper, the disrespectful act of shooting the Albatross, which is analogous to enslavement, instigates a disconnection from the organic unity and the visible world's mercy. Hereby, it allows the whole invisible universe to contribute to the Mariner's punishment. He who

⁹ Many critics have already established this connection between the Albatross and the enslaved. McKusick for example, understands the Albatross as "an emblematic representation of all the innocent lives destroyed by European conquest" (Lee 684). Ebbotson sees the shooting of the albatross as a symbol for "the crux of colonial expansion, the enslavement of native peoples" (Lee 677). And Kitson reads it as a symbol for the "sin" of the "British nation against the young republic, and its pursuit of gain in the slave trade" (Kitson 205-206).

subjected the Albatross to his own arbitrary sentiments, is now himself subjected to the arbitrary invisible universe. This affects the Mariner to the extent that he would rather “sleep away” (471) than keep bearing his torments. But he is not the only one who is punished: the entire crew drops dead. And this makes sense, because Coleridge strongly believed that the European consumer (of slave products such as sugar and rum) is just as responsible for slavery as the slave-merchant (*Slave Trade* 109). Justifying and profiting from it is just as bad as initiating it, and therefore, it is fitting that the crew, who applauded the Mariner’s crime, pay with their deaths. Both instigators and beneficiaries of (symbolic) slavery cause cruelty, and are repaid with cruelty.

4.3.4. *Perpetrator trauma*

The Mariner is ruthlessly punished by the universe, but he also comes to some crucial personal insights, and perhaps the latter are just as traumatizing as the punishment itself. In essence, he makes a transition from disrespecting the “other”, to being punished for this, to respecting the “other”. The fact that he blesses the water-snakes in the third stage is key here, because it symbolizes his acknowledgement of the “radically alter” (Lee 693). The Mariner realises that the “alter” (both the Albatross and the water-snakes) which he at first subjected to his own cruelty, do have value as creatures of the same universe.

For this reason, his act of blessing the water-snakes makes the universe forgive and re-integrate him, but does not free him from his sense of guilt. If anything, it enhances it, because he now understands his own heartlessness in shooting the Albatross. Whereas the universe showed him *that* it was a crime, his own insight shows him *why* it was a crime.

As a result, the “uncanny recognition of the water snakes as ‘self-same’ initiates him in a process of ever-deeper questioning of himself and the assumption underlying his culture” (Lee 693). By finally finding himself connected to the “other”, he understands the severe

injustice of his previous act. And the analogy between this realisation and Coleridge's anti-slavery is not hard to make. In his lecture *On the Slave Trade*, he reminded his British listeners that "you are commanded to do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you" (109), and proceeds with some confronting questions:

Would *you* choose, that a slave merchant should incite an intoxicated chieftain to make war on your Country, and murder your Wife and Children before your face, or drag them with yourself to the Market? Would you choose to be sold? to have the hot iron hiss upon your breasts, after having been crammed into the hold of a Ship with so many fellow-victims, that the heat and stench, arising from your diseased bodies, should rot the very planks? Would *you*, that others should do this unto *you*? And if you shudder with selfish horror at the bare idea, do you yet dare be the occasion of it to others? (109, emphasis in original)

The analogy is of course that the British, like the Mariner, will, perhaps through divine intervention and punishment, eventually have to acknowledge the horrors of their crimes. As with the Mariner's realisation, the British' insight should result in an uncanny recognition of their own heartless actions, and potentially lead to severe perpetrator trauma.

To summarize, there are two biographical elements that help to explain the Mariner's trauma. Firstly, there is Coleridge's idea of unity in the universe. This unity is beneficial, because it organises a coherent world that we can understand. However, when people disrespect this unity, for example by randomly shooting albatrosses, they are expelled from it and subjected to traumatically dislocating arbitrariness. This is linked to a second biographical element: Coleridge's aversion to slavery. The Mariner's act of shooting the Albatross is analogous to Europe's act of imposing and profiting from slavery, and the Mariner's almost

divine punishment then matches Coleridge's fear of vengeance by Providence on Europe. Additionally, the Mariner's perpetrator trauma for shooting the Albatross can be linked to the European's realisation of guilt for partaking in the slave-system. The Mariner's tale as an unreliable traumatic testimony fits *The Rime* perfectly, because it allows the author to covertly voice his own greatest horrors through a multi-layered narrative.

Conclusion

Clearly, it is rewarding to analyse the Mariner's psychological development. A closer look at his altered behaviour shows us that the experiences on the sea have strongly traumatized him. Plus, further analysis of this trauma illuminates that the Mariner's story should not be taken at face value, but that this unreliable traumatic testimony means much more than a general transition from guilt to redemption.

As a start, this paper has interpreted the Mariner's experiences on the sea at their surface level. This interpretation has shown that the Mariner, as a result of multiple disrespectful acts towards the world's creatures, is excommunicated from the everyday logical "visible" world, and thrown into a nightmarishly arbitrary "invisible" world that is void of any natural laws as we know them. In this otherworldly realm, he for instance meets Death and Life-in-Death, needs to suck his own blood to speak, and is at one point all alone on the sea between the corpses of his crewmates. Common sense already tells us that this will turn out to be traumatic, but theories of the grotesque and the abject help to clarify the importance of this. The theory of the grotesque explains that such experiences are horrifying because they depict the ultimate violation of boundaries in the invisible world, subvert reality as we know it, and show a world that we cannot know nor control. Kristeva's notion of the abject further illustrates that the Mariner's trauma originates from a complete alienation and a forced confrontation with the "other". In *The Rime*'s invisible universe, a natural reaction of expelling the abject (e.g. shooting the Albatross) only results in further subjection to it (e.g. Death and Life-in-Death). Because of this fundamental paradox, the Mariner is forced to embrace the abject (e.g. bless the water-snakes), and it hardly surprises that this will traumatize him.

This is not only proven in the Mariner's testimony, but also in his interaction with the Wedding-Guest. His testimony hints at an impending trauma by signalling that the experiences will never leave him in peace, but that they will continue to horrify him in the future. He

“hath penance done”, but also “penance more will do” (408-409). A look at the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest confirms the Mariner’s trauma. He has become obsessed with the events to the extent that he keeps endlessly retelling them and has even absorbed them in his own appearance; he actually looks like “the ribbed sea-sand” (227). And next to that, his attitude has shifted completely; he has gone from shooting random birds to compulsively professing that one must love all nature’s creatures. Importantly, contemporary theories of the unconscious and trauma theory illustrate that this obsessed behaviour makes perfect sense. The Mariner’s general obsession and his constant urge to tell his tale, much like a lunatic, or “loon” (11), are linked to the resurfacing of repressed memories and LaCapra’s theory of “acting out”. Moreover, the origins of the Mariner’s trauma can also be explained by trauma theory. His experiences were so alienating and overwhelming that his mind could not grasp them at the moment of perception. As a result, he is trapped inside these events: his mind keeps compulsively forcing him to re-narrate the experiences and thereby relive them. He has become a traumatized *ancient* Mariner while telling his tale.

That the Mariner fails to grasp his own experiences is crucial, because it indicates that he cannot give an accurate or straightforward account of what really happened. There are numerous reasons not to accept his story as simple truth. He was most likely hallucinating during his whole experience, all evidence sank along with the ship, and there are no witnesses beside himself. His “tale” repeatedly alludes to the fictional nature of stories through its references to myths. And moreover, the heavily mediated nature of his testimony also stresses the huge distance between the interpretation of the events and their actual occurrence. Coleridge’s readers are given a self-consciously archaic text about a Mariner who is talking to a Wedding-Guest about events recalled from an *ancient* memory, which happened to him while he was in a hallucinating state. Surely the events have been altered quite a bit in this process. Furthermore, also trauma theory stresses that such testimonies are not to be taken at face-

value. Trauma victims are often unable to accurately retell their experiences because these were too alienating to grasp to begin with, and therefore they resort to the “hyperbolic aesthetic of the sublime” (LaCapra, “Writing Trauma” 93). This leads to the conclusion that there must be more behind the Mariner’s hyperbolic story than a dead albatross, a rotting sea, or meeting Death and lady Life-in-Death, and that the moral of his story is much more complex than “he prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small” (614-615).

Hence, the Mariner’s trauma is not a random feature of *The Rime*, but a key device that allows the author to give his poem a multi-layered meaning. In this expressive, Romantic work, the allegorical layers are strongly linked to the author’s biography, and we could go as far as to say that what traumatizes the mariner is what horrified the author. The Mariner’s boundary-crossing from the visible into the invisible world is linked to Coleridge’s view on organic unity in the universe. Disharmonizing the organic unity means being excommunicated from it, into a realm that is void of any logic, void of any unity. This disconnection traumatizes the Mariner, and it is very likely what the author feared the most. This claim makes sense especially when linked to a second element from Coleridge’s biography; his anti-slavery. As argued by several critics (Lee 677, 684, Kitson 205-206), there is a strong link between the Mariner shooting the Albatross and Britain supporting slavery. Essentially, both acts disrespect the organic unity of the universe, and both should bear the same punishment. Consequently, the Mariner’s trauma of a detachment from the visible / organic universe after shooting the Albatross, is analogous to the author’s fear of divine punishment for Europe’s profiting from slavery.

A study of the Mariner’s trauma thus illustrates that there is more to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* than its complex symbolism. Even though Wordsworth claimed that the Mariner “has no distinct character” (Magnuson 83), his traumatized character is an essential part of the poem, and we could even say that the symbolism is there in function of the Mari-

ner's traumatic testimony rather than the other way around. In any case, an analysis of the Mariner's psyche, and especially of his traumatized behaviour, rewards us with a richer insight in the poem and its author. It illustrates that even more than two hundred years after its conception, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* keeps the voice and fears of its author more alive than ever.

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