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Reimagining Oceanic Consciousness: A Blue Humanities Reading of
Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner



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Abstract

The study explores Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) through the emerging interdisciplinary framework of *Blue Humanities*. It aims to emphasize the poem's deep engagement with oceanic environments. By employing Steve Mentz's concept of oceanic consciousness (2024), the research contends that the ocean functions as an active and dynamic participant, and shapes the Mariner's psychological, moral and ecological awareness. Through qualitative research method and close textual analysis, the study investigates Coleridge's depiction of ocean imagery, shifting seascapes, marine life, and the Mariner's evolving inner state. By foregrounding the ocean's agency and ethical presence, the analysis positions the poem as anticipatory of contemporary environmental and marine thought. Incorporating Serpil Oppermann's concept of aqueous relationality (2023), the study emphasizes the fluid and interconnected relations between humans and water bodies. This framework reveals the ocean as a morally and ecologically transformative space. Ultimately, the research offers fresh insight into Coleridge's environmental imagination, and demonstrates how the poem reconceives the sea as a site of ethical reflection, ecological interconnection, and evolving oceanic consciousness.

Keywords: Oceanic Consciousness, Blue Humanities, Ecological Awareness, Aqueous Relationality, Transformation

Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1838) is a famous Romantic poet, who belongs to the eighteenth century. His contribution to the field of romantic poetry and prose is exceptional. He is also considered a Romantic critic as he wrote *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Coleridge's art of poetry makes his work sublime. His art of narration and themes seem to be elevated and universal due to using figures of speech and supernatural elements. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) (henceforth *TRAM*) stands as perhaps the most iconic example of his unique style.

In the age of climate crisis, rising sea levels, ocean pollution, and marine ecosystem collapse, the way Coleridge represents the ocean in *TRAM* has taken on renewed significance. The emerging discipline of the *Blue Humanities* centers on cultural, historical, and literary relationships with water, and offers powerful tools for reinterpreting *TRAM*. Drawing on Steve Mentz's (2024) concept of ocean consciousness, and Serpil Oppermann's (2023) concept of opaque relationality, this research seeks to address water's material agency, relational complexity, and narrative force in Coleridge's *TRAM*.

As the Romantic era emphasized the powerful, mysterious and sublime force of nature, the traditional criticism of *TRAM* mainly discusses symbolic or religious ideas such as sin, redemption, guilt and atonement. As a result, the poem's deeper ecological meanings have often been overlooked. Thus, such readings tend to treat the ocean as a metaphor for supernatural phenomena or internal states, rather than as a living system with agency. However, the *Blue Humanities* invites a new kind of reading. Rather than perceiving water as passive, *Blue Humanities* considers water itself as a co-participant in meaning-making, capable of shaping narrative, memory, and subjectivity. Steve Mentz, in *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2024), highlights that poetic engagements with the ocean uniquely capture its metaphorical vastness and material power. Simultaneously, Serpil Oppermann, in her influential work *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* (2023), proposes that water is "a dynamic, agentic, and storied force" (Oppermann, 2023, p.3) that participates in cultural production.

By employing the theoretical framework of *Blue Humanities* to Coleridge's *TRAM*, this study addresses a critical gap in Romantic literary criticism. It argues the ecological interconnectedness, oceanic ethics, and what

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might now be described as an oceanic consciousness. In doing so, it builds bridges between Romantic literature and contemporary environmental thought.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes previous research related to Coleridge's theories of imagination, supernaturalism, stylistics, symbolism, and moral philosophy as they pertain to *TRAM*. The review traces these perspectives from contemporary studies back to foundational scholarship, thereby establishing a coherent theoretical basis for a Blue Humanities reading of the poem. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) is widely regarded as both a major Romantic poet and an influential literary critic. His theoretical contributions, particularly articulated in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), continue to shape modern understandings of Romantic poetics. Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination remains a central concept in Romantic studies.

The following articles and books are seen in the existing literature in Coleridge's *TRAM*. Williams (2007) characterizes *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as an imaginative narrative deeply rooted in supernatural symbolism. The albatross serves not only as a literal bird but also as a symbolic figure whose presence and absence create suspense and moral tension throughout the poem. Williams argues that although the poem may appear fragmented or episodic, Coleridge's use of vivid imagery and rhetorical devices allows readers to immerse themselves in what appears to be a coherent and believable world. This believability is directly linked to Coleridge's technique of the "willing suspension of disbelief," which enables readers to accept the supernatural elements as integral components of the narrative. Williams (2007) further highlights Coleridge's rich use of figures of speech, which grants rhythmic and imaginative intensity to the poem. Lines such as, "Once more I viewed the ocean green" (p. 1123), exemplify the sensuous imagery and carefully structured language through which Coleridge evokes the vastness, mystery, and moral significance of the oceanic world. These stylistic features create a fluid, often dreamlike quality that aligns with the thematic interplay of sin, suffering, and redemption.

According to Shalabi and Sadeq (2010), the primary imagination is an innate human capacity shared by all individuals. Whereas the secondary imagination is a heightened, artistic form of imaginative activity that belongs to poets and creative thinkers. This secondary imagination reorders and transforms sensory data. It is often regarded as the source of poetic genius. Coleridge's notion of the "willing suspension of disbelief" also plays a vital role in understanding his creative philosophy. This concept refers to the deliberate act by which readers or audiences accept the supernatural or improbable elements of a narrative as plausible within the fictional world. Shalabi and Sadeq (2010) argue that this technique allows Coleridge to effectively engage readers in extraordinary or otherworldly experiences, especially in *TRAM*, where supernatural occurrences, symbolic figures, and moral lessons are intertwined.

Al-Khader (2014) emphasizes Coleridge's profound attachment to nature. He describes him as a poet who not only observes nature closely but also interprets it through a moral and metaphysical lens. His reading of the *TRAM* stresses that the killing of the albatross functions as a symbolic violation of nature's sanctity, which triggers the mariner's subsequent suffering. This interpretation situates Coleridge within a long Romantic tradition in which nature is represented as a moral force capable of rewarding virtue and punishing transgression. Al-Khader (2014) also contextualizes Coleridge's poetic vision through his travels to Germany in 1798, which significantly influenced his aesthetic philosophy.

Singh (2021) examines the symbolic and supernatural dimensions of *TRAM*. He argues that Coleridge masterfully blends natural and supernatural elements to produce a narrative that is both morally instructive and artistically profound. Singh highlights the poem's central moral message—that wrongdoing invariably leads to consequences—thus situating the poem within broader discourses of ethics and spirituality. Furthermore, Singh (2021) notes that the poem's symbolic complexity lends itself to modern interpretations. The poem's

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emphasis on guilt, ecological awareness, spiritual dislocation, and moral reckoning resonates with contemporary concerns, including environmental degradation and modern alienation. This interpretive flexibility demonstrates the poem's enduring relevance and its ability to speak to evolving human experiences.

Khan and Awan (2022) offer a complementary stylistic interpretation, examining the poem through semantic, grammatical, lexical, graphological, and syntactic patterns. Their analysis suggests that Coleridge uses lexical items in unconventional ways to create a distinct poetic voice that separates literary language from everyday speech. This deviation heightens the supernatural tone of the poem and reinforces its spiritual and biblical undertones. They argue that stylistics is an essential method for interpreting both the structural and thematic complexity of literary texts, particularly for students and researchers in literature and linguistics.

The reviewed scholarship demonstrates that Coleridge's *TRAM* continues to attract critical interest across multiple domains, including Romantic aesthetics, supernaturalism, stylistics, symbolism, and moral philosophy. Coleridge's theories of imagination, his fusion of nature and supernaturalism, his moral vision, and his stylistic innovations provide a multidimensional foundation for further exploration.

The reviewed scholarship also establishes a strong base for a Blue Humanities reading of the poem by highlighting its oceanic imagery, ecological consciousness, and moral engagement with the natural world. Through its imaginative power, symbolic resonance, and philosophical depth, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* offers fertile ground for reinterpreting oceanic consciousness in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of the ocean in shaping Ancient Mariner's consciousness and transformation in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.
2. To demonstrate how the poem anticipates contemporary environmental and marine concerns through Blue Humanities theory.

Research Questions

1. How does *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* represent the ocean as an active and transformative force for Ancient Mariner?
2. In what ways does the poem articulate an oceanic consciousness that challenges human-centered ecological perspectives?

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method to analyse Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). "Qualitative method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions. It generates non-numerical data" (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013, p. 1). Qualitative method involves detailed close reading of symbolic descriptions of marine life, oceanic imagery, and representations of water as an active agent. The analysis also engages contextual insights from Romantic-era environmental thought and contemporary ecocritical scholarship. It ensures a comprehensive interpretative framework for understanding the poem's marine-centered worldview.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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Theoretical Framework

The present research is grounded in the field of Blue Humanities that engages humans with marine world. The framework draws primarily on the work of Steve Mentz (2024) and Serpil Oppermann (2023). Their perspectives enable a re-reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (henceforth TRAM) through an ocean-centered, rather than human centered.

In his work, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2024), Mentz says that the “blue humanities comprises a current of scholarly and artistic discourses that foreground human relationships with water in all its forms” (Mentz, 2024, p. 17). Mentz also describes “the ocean seems especially attractive because of its metaphorical vastness” (Mentz, 2024, p. 3). This reflects that how Coleridge uses the ocean not only as a physical setting but also a metaphor for spiritual crisis. Further Mentz discusses that water itself is transformative: “as soon as we encounter water, it changes” (Mentz, 2024, p. 14). This idea resonates deeply with the Mariner’s journey as every encounter; he has with the sea, leads to psychological and moral change.

In the similar vein, Serpil Oppermann’s *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* (2023) highlights water as an agentic, dynamic and storied force. She situates the concept of aqueous relationality and asserts “water as a fluid site of narrativity where diverse aqueous life-forms call for our attentiveness to their stories” (Oppermann, 2023, p. 3). Oppermann argues that “water reworks boundaries as much as it bounds; it territorializes as it deterritorializes” (Oppermann, 2023, p. 4). Oppermann’s idea that water constantly dissolve and redefines boundaries is seen in TRAM, as the ocean repeatedly destabilizes the Mariner’s sense of humanity, morality and self-mirroring. This ontology foregrounds the poem’s fluid movement between spiritual, ecological, and emotional states and enables Coleridge’s 18th-century poem within modern environmental thought.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it brings together Romantic literature and the emerging field of the Blue Humanities to reveal new ecological dimensions in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. While previous scholarship has largely focused on the poem’s spiritual symbolism, moral themes, or narrative structure, and limited research has examined the poem through an ocean-centered framework that highlights the agency of marine environments. Drawing on Mentz’s theory of oceanic consciousness and Oppermann’s concept of aqueous relationality, this study fills a research gap by demonstrating how the poem anticipates contemporary concerns about environmental ethics, marine ecology, and human–water relationships. The research emphasizes that Coleridge portrays the ocean not as a passive backdrop but as a transformative force that restructures the Mariner’s psychological, moral, and ecological awareness. The present study contributes to environmental blue humanities by uncovering early literary expressions of Anthropocene anxieties, ecological interdependence, and critiques of human-centered epistemologies. Ultimately, the study offers a fresh interpretative perspective that enriches both Coleridge studies and modern ecological discourse.

Analysis and Discussion

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge presents the ocean not only as a backdrop of human action, but presents as a transformative, and dynamic force that actively shapes the narrative, consciousness, and ethical understanding. Through encounters with the ocean and its creatures, the Mariner experiences profound psychological, ethical, and ecological consciousness and transformation. By engaging with the concepts of oceanic consciousness (Mentz, 2024) and aqueous relationality (Oppermann, 2023), the study explores the ocean’s role in shaping the Mariner’s journey, and cultivate an awareness of interconnectedness between humans and the marine world.

Ocean as an Active and Transformative Force

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (henceforth *TRAM*) presents the ocean as a materially active force that shapes narrative and consciousness. From the outset, the poem emphasizes the overwhelming power of the sea:

"The ship was cheered, the harbor cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top" (ll, 13–16).

The above lines situate the Mariner within a dynamic, moving ocean that immediately defines his journey. The ocean is not merely a neutral space but sets the conditions for human action and interaction. It functions as a participant in the situation, and influences the ship's movement, the crew's experience, and the Mariner's subsequent moral and psychological transformation. As Oppermann (2023) highlights that water possesses narrative agency; it "actively shapes identities and ethical perception" (p. 3). In this sense, the ocean in Coleridge's poem performs a similar function. It imposes both physical and moral consequences on the Mariner, and underscores the relational interplay between human and nonhuman forces.

In the similar way, the poem portrays the ocean's transformative power through the consequences of the Mariner's violence against nature. The killing of the albatross, a creature intrinsically connected to the ocean and water, triggers a chain of ecological and moral disruption:

"Ah! well-a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung" (ll, 141–144).

Here, it is observed that the natural world, mediated by the ocean and its inhabitants, imposes punishment and initiates a moral awakening. Oppermann's (2023) notion of aqueous relationality, wherein water dissolves boundaries and redefines relationships, is evident. The Mariner's bond with the oceanic ecosystem is shattered by his action, and demonstrates how water and marine life act as moral and ecological agents. The sea's responsiveness embodies what Mentz (2024) describes as oceanic consciousness, highlighting the ocean's capacity to transform human thought and ethics through direct encounter: "as soon as we encounter water, it changes" (p. 14). Mariner starts feeling guilty for his act.

Oceanic Consciousness and the Decentering of Human Exceptionalism

A central concern of Blue Humanities theory is the decentering of anthropocentric perspectives in favour of relational ecologies. In the Mariner's journey, the ocean fosters such a decentering. The Mariner gradually perceives himself not as the dominant actor but as a participant within a broader ecological network:

"He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast" (ll. 609–610).

The above lines illustrate a shift in consciousness, in which the Mariner recognizes ethical interdependence with all creatures, including marine life. Oppermann's concept of a "relational aqueous ontology" (2023, p. 9) is particularly relevant, as it frames water as a network of relations that connects human and nonhuman entities. The Mariner's moral and psychological development is inseparable from his immersion in the ocean's relational web, confirming the poem's anticipatory ecological insight.

The ocean's unpredictability further reinforces this decentering. Coleridge's descriptions of shifting seascapes, fogs, and storms exemplify the instability and agency of marine environments:

"And the good south wind still blew behind,
But no sweet bird did follow" (ll. 67–68).

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Here, the ocean's forces operate independently of human intention, emphasizing the limits of human control. Mentz (2024) argues that literary depictions of water foreground human vulnerability while expanding ethical and imaginative scales (p. 5). The Mariner's experiences align with this claim: the ocean teaches humility, interdependence, and attentiveness to the agency of nonhuman forces.

Hydrological Ethics and Moral Transformation

The poem's engagement with oceanic agency extends to ethical reflection. As the Mariner recognizes the intrinsic value of marine life, the act of blessing sea creatures, a moment of epiphany, exemplifies this ethical shift:

"O happy living things! no tongue

Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,

And I blessed them unaware" (ll. 592–595).

The Mariner's newfound ability to perceive value in the nonhuman world illustrates water's role as a medium for ethical awakening. The ocean is both setting and teacher, illustrating Oppermann's (2023) principle that water "reworks boundaries as much as it bounds" (p. 4). By participating in the oceanic network, the Mariner comes to understand his entanglement with nonhuman life and the consequences of ecological disruption.

The Oceanic Sublime and Aesthetic Experience

TRAM also exemplifies the oceanic sublime, blending aesthetic experience with ecological awareness. Mentz's (2024) asserts that poetry mediates between human perception and expansive ecological scales (p. 5). The sea's vastness, danger, and unpredictability evoke awe and fear while facilitating insight into relational ethics:

"The ice was here, the ice was there,

The ice was all around:

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound!" (ll. 157–160).

The sublime experience of the ocean destabilizes the Mariner's ego, fostering receptivity to ecological interdependence. The aesthetic encounter with water merges moral and imaginative education, and illustrates how literature cultivates oceanic consciousness.

Ocean as a Medium of Narrative and Temporal Transformation

The ocean in *TRAM* is not only agentic but also a medium that structures narrative temporality. The poem's episodic encounters with marine environments—the killing of the albatross, the curse of the crew's death, and the eventual blessing of sea creatures—underscore the ocean's role in shaping the Mariner's temporal and experiential trajectory. DeLoughrey (2017) emphasizes that oceans function as "critical planetary systems that shape human and nonhuman histories" (p. 32). Similarly, Coleridge's oceanic landscapes manipulate time, memory, and consciousness, and illustrates water's material and symbolic capacity to organize human experience.

The Mariner's cyclical journey—from hubris to guilt, isolation, insight, and social reintegration—reflects this temporal modulation. Each stage of his moral, ethical and ecological development is mediated by encounters with the ocean, which highlights its integral narrative role.

Blue Humanities and Ecological Anticipation

The research foregrounds that Coleridge's poem anticipates contemporary environmental concerns. As the Mariner's punishment, his ethical awakening, and ongoing storytelling serve as early forms of ecological pedagogy. Water is shown as a participant in moral and ecological systems, foreshadowing modern concerns

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about ocean health, climate change, and biodiversity. As Mentz (2024) emphasizes that literary engagement with oceans fosters ecological imagination, while Oppermann (2023) insists on attending to water's agency in relational ethical framework, and together, Mentz's and Oppermann's theories illuminate Coleridge's forward-looking treatment of marine consciousness. The poem likely contributes to both Romantic literary scholarship and contemporary environmental humanities by modeling relational accountability to aquatic systems. Through close textual analysis, it is highlighted that Coleridge portrays the sea as materially active, that influences human action, consciousness, and morality. The ocean and its inhabitants enforce ecological consequences and facilitate ethical awakening, consistent with Oppermann's (2023) theory of aqueous relationality. The poem articulates a consciousness that decouples morality and identity from human exceptionalism, emphasizing relational interdependence with nonhuman life (Mentz, 2024). The Mariner's experiences illustrate how immersion in oceanic systems fosters ethical and spiritual transformation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* offers oceanic consciousness that resonates deeply with the core concerns of the Blue Humanities. Through the theoretical lens of Steve Mentz and Serpil Oppermann, the analysis demonstrates that Coleridge positions the ocean as an active, agentic, and transformative force that reshapes the Mariner's psychological, moral and ecological awareness. By foregrounding aqueous relationality and oceanic agency, *TRAM* emerges as a foundational work that reimagines the sea as a site of ecological interconnectedness, ethical transformation, and enduring environmental reflection.

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