

Sin, punishment, redemption and salvation in the figure of *The Ancient Mariner*

The poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by the romantic poet Coleridge recounts the spiritual journey of the ancient mariner, from the killing of the albatross in the first part of the poem, which is his sin, to his punishment, redemption and salvation. Such story is immersed in a supernatural dimension in which sometimes correspondences and events cannot be judged based on rational assumptions, but they need to be interpreted in symbolic terms.

After the shooting of the albatross, in the second part of the poem the other mariners accuse the ancient mariner, since they thought the bird was connected to the idea of the breeze blowing and helping the ship move. However, soon after they realize that the fog has cleared off, they justify the crime and become themselves as guilty as the mariner. Although at the beginning of the poem the sin seems to be implicitly un-condemned, it starts to be avenged by nature when it deprives the mariners of the nice wind and rewards them with an unbearable drought. At this point, the albatross is hung around the mariner’s neck, so as to always remind him of his sin, which is not only against nature, but also against God himself. In fact, by interrupting the harmonious relationship between man and nature, the mariner has also halted the communication between humans and God himself.

In part III, due to the victory of Life-in-death (which represents the ancient mariner) over death, all the other mariners die. However, they still curse and blame the mariner with their reproachful gaze.

The phase of redemption starts in part IV, in which the mariner looks to heaven and tries to pray. But all he can see is a rotting sea, a rotting deck and slimy things, together with the angry look that his ship fellows give him. This sense of immobility suddenly starts to fade when he has a revelation, which Joyce would probably call “epiphany”: for the first time, he is able to see shining, white water-snakes, rather than slimy things. He feels a sudden and unexpected love which gives him strength and hope. He can finally pray, therefore the dead albatross falls into the sea.

However, the mariner still has blood on his body, which means that he has not washed his sin yet. In the last part of the poem, in the same way the albatross had disappeared before, now the ancient mariner’s ship disappears all of a sudden, but he is saved by the Pilot and the Holy Hermit, who were on another boat. This supernatural event symbolizes the salvation of the mariner, who now is finally free from the curse of the mariners’ looks. However, his penance will never be over, he will always feel agony because in order to expiate his guilt he will always have to tell his story to others (in this case he is telling it to the wedding guest).