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Transatlantic Romanticism  
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Views of the Sea by Transatlantic Poets

In the modern world, the sea is typically portrayed as a place for romance or an escape. However, this view was significantly different in the 1800s because instead of being an escape, the poetry of Samuel Coleridge and Alfred Lord Tennyson shows that the sea can be a cruel and unforgiving place, or even being. Coleridge and Tennyson portray the sea quite differently in their poetry. Coleridge and Tennyson both apply Burke's idea of the sublime to their poetic treatments of the sea, but Coleridge emphasizes the elements of terror and power by portraying the sea as evil, as supernatural but with human characteristics, and as a grave; while Tennyson emphasizes vastness and infinity as the instrument that carries him over the barrier between life and death, while he still personifies it as Coleridge does.

One common theme among many poets in the Romantic period is the sublimity of the sea. Edmund Burke defines “sublime” in his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Although he does not directly mention the sea in this work, his essay can be closely associated with the sea because of the way he defines “sublime”. Burke writes that sublimity involves terror, power, vastness, and infinity (57-59), all of which directly relate to the sea, and many artists depict his definition of the sublime through various paintings of the ocean. Writing on the Romantic representation of the sea, Djehane Hassouna comments on the characteristic of power and its direct relation to the sea when he writes:

‘The water brought us here, the water will take us back’ used to say the slaves of the Georgian Sea Islands, comforting themselves as they placed their hopes for returning home in the super power represented by the sea. If it is capable of causing the solitude of uprootedness, then it must also be capable of causing the tenderness of a reunion. (xvi)

The power of the sea is vast. It can unite or expel, and destroy or fix; it is decided by the changing whim of the sea. The ocean’s temperament is unpredictable, and is apt to challenge anybody that tries to tame or subdue it.

Burke believed that vastness and infinity were essential aspects of sublimity, and said himself that “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime” (59). The ocean is typically renowned for its greatness and expansiveness, which is one of the greatest things that attract people to it. Hassouna believes that the sea draws people to it because of its vastness, and comments on the sublime aspects of the vastness and infinity of the sea that Burke discusses when he writes:

Because water seems to have a link with eternity, with infinity, its depth appears filled with mystery and myth, and the human being’s imagination has inevitably been attracted to these aspects of supernatural life. (xii)

Burke argues that the sea attracts people because people cannot comprehend the vastness of the sea, which is why the ocean is typically viewed as sublime. It is difficult to comprehend its vastness, and many therefore associate it with the supernatural. The vastness and depth of the sea are beyond our imagination, and we are inevitably drawn to the sea when we think about these aspects of the sublime.

Many poets took Burke’s idea of the sublime and made it a central theme in their

poetic works during the Romantic period; one of these is “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Coleridge. Coleridge emphasizes the terror and power of the sea by portraying it as evil, as supernatural, and as a grave. This poem was written in 1817 and casts a mariner and a wedding guest as the two central characters. Throughout his story to the wedding guest, the mariner reveals several views toward the sea and characteristics that set it apart from other forms of nature. The first thing he reveals about the sea is that it seems to have a sort of identity and mind that make it almost human. He personifies the sea and nature throughout the entire poem by saying things like, “And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he / was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his o’ertaking wings, / And chased us south along” (41-44). In actuality, the sea and wind have no gender, nor do they chase ships around. However, the mariner cannot properly explain the story without giving the ocean human characteristics. By personifying the ocean, Coleridge implies that it has emotions, and due to its power and sublimity, it becomes a formidable foe for any sea-faring captain or crew. Hassouna says, “Comparable to man, the ocean is having fun: portrayed like a student, who is careful at times and negligent at others, the sea is only doing its homework” (198). The sea is just a person; it can be serious, but likes to have fun as well. The only difference lies in the fact that it has much more power. The mariner challenged the sea’s might by killing the albatross; and by shooting the albatross, he showed that he had no compassion for nature. This angers the sea, which the mariner explains when he says how the ship sails nicely, then is caught in the doldrums and the sailors are left to perish.

More particularly, the mariner portrays the sea as evil because it uses its sublime characteristics of power and vastness to directly attack the sailors. The sea is constantly

trying to trap the ship and kill its crew. The first instance of this occurs after the sea carries the ship to Antarctica. After they arrive there, the ship gets caught in the ice and it is only through the good omen of the albatross that the sailors are able to get out alive. After they are freed, the sea carries them nicely past the equator and it seems as though the journey is going to be smooth, and then the sea suddenly stops them in the doldrums. Since the albatross is dead, their good luck has failed and all of the crewmen die except for the single mariner. The mariner says, "The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew, / The furrow followed free; / We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea" (103-106). The sea makes them feel as if they are finally out of all the trouble, but to no avail. The next stanza says, "Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down, / 'Twas sad as sad could be; / And we did speak only to break / The silence of the sea!" (107-110). The sailors are left in complete mercy to the arbitrary changes of the sea. The sea is simply toying with the sailors by leading them on, only to suddenly stop them and use other forms of nature (the sun) to slowly kill them. The sea uses a cruel irony because, while there is "Water, water, every where", there is "Nor any drop to drink" (121-122). The sea kills them by starving them of any drinkable water when they are in fact completely stranded because of it. The sea just wants to have fun, which it does in the evilest of ways.

The mariner also portrays the sea as supernatural. It is a place where spirits may dwell freely because of its vastness. The mariner talks about the spirit from Antarctica that carries the ship away from the doldrums at a supernatural speed by saying, "From the land of mist and snow, / The spirit slid: and it was he / That made the ship to go" (378-380). The sea is a home to this spirit, and it can roam through the sea as much as it

wishes. However, this is not the only spirit that can be found in the ocean. The sea is also the place where Death and Life-in-Death choose to travel. The condition of the sails and wood show that their ship has clearly been on the sea for quite some time (177-194), and this shows that they are on the sea more often than they are on the land. The fact that the sea is sublime allows them to do this.

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, the mariner also shows the sea as a grave. While many view a grave as a bad thing, the mariner argues that this is not necessarily the case. When the mariner is forgiven for killing the albatross, the bird falls off his neck and sinks into the ocean, finally lifting the curse and allowing the bird to be at peace. The albatross saved the mariners from the sea, but became a curse once it was killed. Its spirit finds its rest only after it is allowed to sink into the sea. Along with the albatross, the ship itself finds its grave within the sea. For a while, the ship was acting as a grave for the mariners who died onboard, but their spirits were never at peace. Once the ship served its purpose and the lone mariner was rescued, it could finally break and go “down like lead” (549), giving the sailor’s souls peace at last. This grave is welcomed because the sailors, who had been possessed by spirits, could not enter into the real world in their condition. Instead, they go down with their ship and join the other spirits that travel the sea.

Another poem that deals with the sea is “Crossing the Bar” by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Tennyson has a very different outlook on the sea from Coleridge because he stresses the vastness and infinity of the sea, and also views it as the sublime instrument that will carry him over the barrier between life and death. While Coleridge primarily views the sea as an evil being that seeks only to kill and destroy, Tennyson sees it as a

great escape from life. The “Bar” that he talks about is a sand bar, which represents the barrier between life and death. In Tennyson’s mind, the sea is equal to death, but not in a bad way. It is seen more as a freedom than anything else. The vastness and sublimity of the sea allows the narrator to roam free for an eternity. Tennyson wrote this poem three months before he died, and he felt that the ocean could accurately describe his feelings toward death. He wanted a peaceful death, and so he wrote, “And may there be no moaning of the bar, / When I put out to sea” (3-4). In the next stanza, he continues explaining his preferred way of dying by saying, “But such a tide as moving seems asleep, / Too full for sound and foam, / When that which drew from out the boundless deep / Turns again home!” (5-8). He would like to die in his sleep and completely at peace, just as the ocean is peaceful and its tide ebbs smoothly on the shore.

Even within this poem, Tennyson uses the last line of every stanza to allude to his setting out to sea for his “final voyage”. While writing about this poem, Harold Bloom says, “Tennyson always remained a daemonic elegist, perpetually mourning.... Each of the four stanzas relies upon a ‘shortened concluding line, reining and subduing the feeling’” (417). The final lines of each stanza are respectively, “When I put out to sea / Turns again home / When I embark / When I have crost the bar” (4, 8, 12, 16). Each stanza ends with the sea taking him away from the side of the bar where life is found, and carrying him to the side of death. Bloom continues on this point and, when referencing the second stanza (“But such a tide as moving seems asleep, / Too full for sound and foam, / When that which drew from out the boundless deep / turns again home” (5-8).), says, “Home is part of the original Chaos, and Tennyson has yielded up all fantasies of societal progress or of manufacturing his daemonic inheritance into a Cosmos” (417).

This supports the idea that the sublime is found throughout this poem. Even in this work, chaos and the supernatural are woven in to give the idea that the sea is infinite and therefore sublime.

The entire poem alludes to Tennyson's death, but the fact that he uses the sea to portray it shows exactly how he viewed the sea itself. In the third stanza, Tennyson writes, "And may there be no sadness of farewell, / When I embark" (11-12). The use of the word "embark" shows that he views death not as the end of his life, but rather the beginning of a journey. He imagines that when he gets on a ship, he is not going to stay there, but instead is going to leave, explore, and have adventures. This is how Tennyson viewed death as it associated to the sea. Death is not the end, but the beginning of an adventure with his "Pilot" (15) in Heaven.

Both Tennyson and Coleridge view the sea with different mindsets, but they do show some similarities within their two poems. The first is that they cannot help but associate the sea with other forms of nature. Both poets use the image of the sun in their poems to signify death. Although it is in different ways (Coleridge views it as the bringer of death overall a bad thing, while Tennyson has a gentler approach and associates the setting sun with a beautiful and peaceful death), the sun plays a major role and coincides with the sea's plans, either for good or for bad. Both poems also personify the ocean, which suggests that the ocean plays an active role in the lives of people because it has human characteristics itself. One more way the poems are similar (but definitely not the last) is how each poet acknowledges the sea as simply an expanse of water, but they each admit that it is so much more than that. They view it as the bringer of death and life, a supernatural being, and other extremely important roles in the lives of men. These

similarities suggest that the sea, according to the Nineteenth Century poets, is never just an expanse of water, but something almost invigorating and spiritual that *must* be expressed.

Nineteenth Century poets (like Coleridge and Tennyson) portrayed the sea in different ways, but it is plain to see that its sublimity and expanse captivated the hearts of many. While some viewed it as evil, supernatural, and as a grave (like Coleridge), others had a more positive outlook and saw it merely as a barrier between life and death that marked the beginning of an exciting voyage (like Tennyson). Either way, no one can deny the impact it had on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century poets, and the impact that it still holds on writers to this day.



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