

A Lacanian Reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*

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Abstract

The present paper compares Lacanian Psychoanalytic *Orders* in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*. *Imaginary Order* and *Symbolic Order* are basic notions studied as a path to a better understanding of the poems. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Ancient Mariner has not entered the realm of the *Symbolic Order* completely and it can be claimed he still partly lives in the *Imaginary Order*. Despite the fact that the two poems are different in narrative and character development, some similarities are revealed in the way the main characters pass the *Orders* and form their final individuality. Both Christabel and the Mariner have connections with Imaginary Order which has hindered their complete transition to the Symbolic Order. However, some events loosen their bonds with this Order and cause their complete transition to the Symbolic Order.

Keywords: Imaginary order, Symbolic order, Lacanian psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) is known as one of the most influential English literary intellectuals of his era and a writer who tried to combine literary analysis with the insight of other areas of knowledge and who worked on giving literary criticism a philosophical basic idea. He had a great influence on English and American traditions of philosophical idealism, enlightened political conservatism, and liberal interpretations of Trinitarian theology. He is a

prominent figure even now and his ideas are referred to by critics who try to provide the rationale and do not appreciate the Romantic poetry. Some of his poems, namely, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and *Kubla Khan* contain demons and mysteries. His other poems are blank verses of meditative and lonely minds.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is about killing an innocent Albatross by a mariner, the torments which he tolerates consequently and his ultimate coming to appreciate the beauties of nature. He gradually comes to the conclusion that loving all creatures end in loving and praying God.

Christabel is about a Baron's daughter named Christabel who experiences a unique night in which she visits her mother's ghost. She helps the spirit and takes Geraldine to her father's castle while she does not know the pretty and weary woman. In the castle, Baron recognizes his old love. Christabel's mother died when her daughter was born, and after so many years, her ghost comes back and Christabel helps her mother's ghost and takes her to the castle, and her father confronts her after so many years.

Although the famous poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, has been analyzed and studied by many critics and through different perspectives, few studies have targeted the root problem of the Mariner to lack of successful pass through Lacanian Orders. On the other hand, *Christabel*, has been the target of fewer studies and rare studies have analyzed Christabel's desires according to Lacanian psychoanalysis. The objective of this research is looking at the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* through Lacanian psychoanalysis. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the survival of the Ancient Mariner and the death of all other seamen are analyzed through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Although the Mariner has committed a crime, and severe punishment is expected for him, all other sailors die instead while he survives. The difference between the *Imaginary Order* and the *Symbolic Order* and the way somebody enters the latter one are studied in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The Mariner goes into a process in which he passes from *Imaginary Order* into *Symbolic Order*. He comes to accept *Laws* including appreciating the beauties and loving all creatures. He should internalize universal love through all his sufferings. Christabel tries to help an unknown young woman who is her mother's ghost. She has the desire to gain unity and wholeness with her mother and live the way she did in the imaginary order; that is she unconsciously seeks *Objet a* and the situation she had in her first several months of life.

Regarding the points, this research seeks to find answer to the following questions:

1. How can we explain the character formation and individuation of the Mariner and Christabel according to Lacanian different Orders?
2. How can the death of all other sailors and the survival of the Mariner be explained according to Lacanian psychoanalysis?
3. Christabel helps her mother, Geraldine. How can the point be explained based on Lacanian psychoanalysis?

2. Lacanian Theories of Psychoanalysis

2.1 *Imaginary Order*

Lacan has not explained *Imaginary Order* explicitly and directly, rather he has left it to the inferences of the reader to understand it; particularly by comparing this *Order* with the two other *Orders* that the child experiences later.

The child lives in *Imaginary Order* from birth to 6 months. *Imaginary Order* contains child's images, wishes and fantasies. The child feels that he is part of his mother and does not recognize that he is an independent separate entity. Moreover, the child cannot recognize himself from the environment. He does not even recognize his limbs. Looking at the mirror, he identifies himself with his image. The world of images is not the world of imagination but the world of perception, since the child is in preverbal stage which he perceives through images. He has a feeling of completeness because of his union with his mother, his surroundings and the environment. He feels that his mother is enough for the gratification of whatever need he has. He also feels that he has control over the world which is in essence an illusory feeling, but such feeling satisfies him and makes him feel powerful enough (Tyson 27).

Explicating that the transition from infancy to childhood is vital for healthy psychological growth, Hans Berten explains *Imaginary Order* from the point of view of Lacan: "For Lacan, the pre-Oedipal infant lives in what he calls the *Imaginary*. In this state, in which the child cannot yet speak, it is subject to impressions and fantasies, to all sorts of drives, and has no sense of limitations and boundaries" (160). In the *Imaginary Order*, the child knows no rule, no limitation and no restriction. He is in complete union with the world and knows nothing about *laws* or the process of socialization which are awaiting him in the *Symbolic Order*.

2.2 *Symbolic Order*

After *Imaginary Order*, the child enters the *Symbolic Order*. The new *Order* is associated to *the father* in which the child accepts *laws*, learns the language and becomes sociable. The *Symbolic Order* is distinguished from the *Imaginary Order* which is associated to the mother and is the realm of unity and fantasy.

By entering the *Symbolic Order*, the child enters the realm in which the role of the father is important contrasting the *Imaginary Order* in which the role of mother is significant. The relation of father and law is analyzed in Lacan's seminar: "It is in the name of father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of law" (Lacan 230).

Between the age of 6 and 18 months, the child experiences the mirror stage as part of the *Symbolic Order*: "This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates ... the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (Lacan 79). By recognizing his image in the mirror stage and recognizing himself as an independent entity from the surrounding environment, the child enters the *Mirror Stage*. This is the commencement of his socializing process. Lacan emphasizes that "communication" which is a "characteristic of a given cultural milieu" (Lacan 204) is an inseparable part of the *Symbolic*

after which the child enters the society and starts social activities. Communication takes place through language. Language is in essence the phenomenon through which the child learns laws necessary for communication and the process of socialization.

In fact, once the child recognizes that he is neither unified with the world nor with the mother lack. He tries to compensate the lack by learning and using language. Henceforth, it can be claimed that symbolically language represents lack: “Psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the word as the law that has shaped him in his image. It exploits the poetic function of language to give his desire its symbolic meditation” (Lacan 264). Using the words and learning language makes the child ready to enter the Real World.

2.3 Real Order

Lacan’s account of the *Real Order* is “what did not come to light in the symbolic appears in the real” (Lacan 324). The notion of the *Real Order* resists explanation. It is beyond the system of meaning-making and it explains some experiences in a way that ideologies in societies cannot do. It is existence without any filters or protections of meaning-making systems. The Real Order is experienced when someone puts aside all those filters made by ideologies and thinks and feels about something beyond those systems. Although Real exists, it can neither be explained nor controlled (Tyson 32). Habib explains that:

For Lacan, the real is the impossible. Lacan rejects any notion that the mind of either child or adult has any intrinsic psychical unity; it is merely a “subject” rather than a self or ego, merely the occupant of an always moving position in the networks of signification; hence, for Lacan, as he indicates in a famous statement, even “the Unconscious is structured like a language. (590)

As Habib concludes, Lacan believes there is no unity in one’s mind, so he is a *subject* not a self or ego as Freud believes. He believes in moving in a chain of significations. As a result, unity is just possible in the *Imaginary Order* and after that there is a subject who has no unity to make a unified self. In this regard, Lacan develops the idea of Real as a mysterious one:

For the real does not wait [attend], especially not for the subject, since it expects [attend] nothing from speech. But it is there, identical to his existence, a noise in which one can hear anything and everything, ready to submerge with its roar what the "reality principle" constructs there that goes by the name of the "outside world". (Lacan 324)

The Real is something beyond speech. The Real exists but does not wait for the subject. The subject can hear and see what he cannot hear or see in other times. As if he puts aside all the filters and all social principles he believes in. The subject feels a new world and understands new things that later he cannot explain it.

As Tyson clarifies when repressing the desire for the world of childhood, the *Imaginary Order* remains in the background of the consciousness while the *Symbolic Order* remains sway in the foreground. *Imaginary Order* tries to make human incapable of being sociable while the *Symbolic Order* makes the child ready to function in the society and accept the social norms. The *Imaginary Order* is characterized by lack of control which paves the way

for resistance against ideologies structured by the *Symbolic Order*. Lacan believes that both *Imaginary Order* and *Symbolic Order* try to control the Real (Tyson 31-32). The Real represents all that is outside the realm of Symbolic or Imaginary. It is not an entity but a realm of experiences. It is not an ideal but it is the realm of un-ideal. Real is impossible unity of self, enough satisfaction of desire (jouissance) where continuity of signifier and signified or word and object seem impossible.

3. Lacanian Reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

3.1 *Imaginary Order in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

As the Mariner is still in the *Imaginary Order*, he commits the crime of hurting the Nature which is considered a sin. As Kumar Sarker indicates: “So, to commit a crime against Nature, (here, killing the albatross) is equivalent to committing a sin against God. However, at the end of part I of the poem we have come to know that the Mariner has committed a sin against Nature or God” (130). As far as the Mariner still lives in the *Imaginary Order* he has not yet learned the laws including loving and caring all living beings.

On the other hand, it appears that the Mariner has had an incomplete transition to the *Symbolic Order* and this process should become complete for him by Nature. The first *Order* experienced by a child is the *Imaginary Order* in which the child is in unity with the world. At this stage, there is no law and the child knows himself as part of the world. But the *Symbolic Order* is the realm of law in which the role of father is significant. Moving from the former one to the latter one is a point to be considered in this poem. The Mariner has not learned the laws and does not tell the world as independent from him. He breaks the law of God by killing the albatross. The God is symbolized as father and the albatross is symbolized as Jesus Christ as the name albatross is usually accompanied with the adjective ‘Christian Soul’: “As if it had been a Christian soul / We hailed it in God’s name” (Abrams 65-66). The albatross is a “Christian Soul” who comes to the seamen to help them. Whether the albatross exists or not is an ambiguous question as it appears out of mist and fog. After committing the crime of killing the innocent bird, it is around the Mariner’s neck: “Instead of the cross, the Albatross About my neck was hung” (Abrams 141-142). The albatross is more than a bird; it is *Symbolized* as God’s Son.

However, by law of Nature, no sin is left unpunished. The Mariner should accept the responsibility of his crime and undergo the process of punishment, suffering and atonement for complete transition to the *Symbolic Order*. After shooting the albatross, punishment begins. All the universe begins to avenge the crime. The narrator explains the situation: “Water, water, everywhere, / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water, everywhere, / Nor any drop to drink” (Abrams 119- 122). Death and the Night-mare Life-in-Death, in the form of a pale woman appear: “The Night-mare Life-In-Death was she, Who tricks man’s blood with cold” (Abrams 192 -193). The woman makes the sun set. The stars and the moon emerge and the sailors die one after the other until no one except the Mariner is left alive. The Mariner should attain maturity and believe in the universal love in any possible way. He should come to believe that all creatures are worthy of love.

3.2 Symbolic Order in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Undergoing the punishment imposed on him by Nature, the Mariner ultimately enters the *Symbolic Order*. He passes from the *Imaginary Order* to the *Symbolic Order* as now he looks around and appreciates the beauties which were so far neglected by him. He feels responsible for the death of the sailors. In the opening and through the middle part of the poem, the Mariner narrates his story in a way as if other people are not important or they do not exist. He mostly talks about the weather and the geographical situation. But after shooting the albatross and especially period of avenging the bird, he narrates about everything including other sailors. He explains his terrible experience as the sailors die: “The body of my brother’s son / Stood by me, knee to knee: / The body and I pulled at the rope, / But he said naught to me” (Abrams 341-345). The death of his nephew makes him suffer more and more as he feels guilty for his death: “The body of my brother’s son / Stood by me, knee to knee: / The body and I pulled at the rope, / But he said naught to me” (Abrams 341-345).

The Mariner learns to accept and internalize the universal love by which he admires the beauties of the creatures which he didn’t care before. He admires the beauty of water waves as they have snake like movement: “O happy living things! No tongue / Their beauty might declare: / A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed from unaware: / Sure my kind saint took pity on me, / And I bless them unaware” (Abrams 272-288). These unique moments pave the way for the Mariner to be forgiven. He sleeps and dreams that buckets are filled with dew and when he wakes up his thirst is quenched by rain: “The silly buckets on the deck, / That had so long remained, / I dreamed that they had filled with dew; / And when I awoke, it rained” (Abrams 297-300). Each time the Mariner admires the beauties he finds around him, the blood of the albatross is washed more and part of his sin is forgiven. Once he comes to admire the beauties of Nature, he finds himself able to pray and finally sees that the corpse of the albatross falls down from his neck. This is the moment that he is forgiven by God, the Father, as the result of which he can later on socialize and communicate with a man named Hermit. The Mariner tells Hermit the tale of his sin and forgiveness. That is he is able to use language and words. He ends his tale by: “He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both and great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (Abrams 614-618).

The Mariner’s sociability is as well noticeable in the final part of his narration where he prefers to have a company to go to the church:

O sweeter than the marriage feast,
This sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk
With a goodly company!-
To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his great Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends
And youths and maidens gay! (Abrams 601-609)

At this stage, it can be claimed that he has learned social laws including the rules of communication. He prefers mass praying rather than praying lonely in isolation. Rather than staying at the wedding he prefers to pray to God; symbolic action of accepting and learning rules.

4. Lacanian Reading of *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

4.1 *Imaginary Order in Christabel*

Christabel as a young girl seems has successfully left the Imaginary Order and entered the Symbolic stage of life. However, she lost her mother the moment she was born as the result of which she could never really experience unification with her mother. The loss forms a lack in her unconscious which later on leads her seek unification with a female character. Christabel's wish is revealed through Geraldine's words: "All they who live in the upper sky / Do love you, holly Christabel / And you love them, for their sake / And for the good which me befell / Even I in my degree will try / Fair maiden, to require you well" (Abrams 227-232). H. Nethercot explains this; "She echoes Christabel's girlish wish that her mother were there-although she soon thereafter repents her sympathy. Yet Christabel herself feels that "All will yet be well" (Abrams 36).

It is in essence Christabel's unconscious desire for unification with her mother that leads her help Geraldine or her mother's ghost. She finds Geraldine in the forest and takes her to Sir Leoline's castle which is the residence of his father Geraldine shares her bed with the woman who is a stranger for her: "The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree? / And lo! The worker of these harms, / That holds the maiden in her arms, Seems to slumber still and mild / As a mother with her child" (Abrams 297-301). Both Christabel and Geraldine sleep in one bed which is the symbolic manifestation of the *Imaginary Order's* world; the world of unification with mother and the world.

Christabel is described as an innocent moral maiden: "Yet, she doth smile, and she doth weep / Like a youthful hermitess" (Lacan 319-320). Christabel's innocence and purity form the image of a newly born child still in the *Imaginary Order*.

4.2 *Symbolic Order in Christabel*

Entering the *Symbolic Order*, the child experiences the realm belonging to the father. As Lacan says: "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (Lacan 230). In the *Symbolic Order*, mother is not dominated and paternity just belongs to the father; "For, if the symbolic context requires it, paternity will nevertheless be attributed to women's encounter with a spirit at such and such fountain or at a certain rock at which he is supposed to dwell" (Lacan 464). It means that paternity is not just for men and women are able to accept this role. So, what is meant is not the real father. "This is clearly what demonstrates that the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of the real father, but of what religion has taught us to invoke as the Name-of-the-Father" (Lacan 464). Henceforth, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, *father* means a *Signifier*.

Christabel enters the Symbolic Order when she loosens her emotional bond with her mother. Sir Leoline hears his name from Geraldine and gets agitated: “But when he heard the lady’s tale, / And when she told her father’s name, / Why waxed Sir Leoline so pale, / Murmuring o’er the name again, / Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine?” (Abrams 403-407). Love and sorrow revive in Sir Leoline. Sir Leoline finds his own old love, unites with her and forsakes his only offspring. Christabel watches all these scenes and comes to realize that all her father’s passion now is for Geraldine: “Which when she viewed, a vision fell / Upon the soul of Christabel, / The vision of fear, the touch and pain! / She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again- / (ah, woe is me! Was it for thee / Thou gentle maid! Such sights to see)” (Abrams 451-455)? This is the time that Christabel understands his father’s love toward Geraldine and she is shocked. From this moment on, Christabel does not sympathize with Geraldine, but she cannot talk because she is spelled; ““What ails then my beloved child?” / The Baron said-His daughter mild / Made answer, “All will be well!” / I ween, she had no power to tell / Aught else: so mighty was the spell” (Abrams 470-474).

Christabel is frequently depicted at praying. When the poem opens she is at the woods, praying for the knight she is supposed to marry: “The lovely lady, Christabel, ...She had dreams all yesternight /Of her own betrothèd knight; /And she in the midnight wood will pray /For the weal of her lover that's far away” (23-30). She has the carving of an angel in her room. Her act of praying is the symbolic acceptance of the domination of a Signifier.

5. Conclusion

Lacanian three Orders of psychic development can explicate the behavior of the Ancient Mariner and Christabel as the central characters of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* respectively. The Ancient Mariner had incomplete transition to Imaginary Order, and Christabel still had unconscious reminiscent desires pertinent to the *Imaginary Order*. During the course of the poem some events lead both characters move completely to the *Symbolic Order*.

In *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner kills the albatross, since he is still in the *Imaginary Order* and has not learned laws including the prominent law of Nature regarding loving all creatures. Norman Guthrie makes the theme of love significant. He appreciates this theme as he says: “The gem of his poem is love. If God loves all, and we love God, we must love all. If we love all, we would harm none” (213). He believes in loving everybody and every creature as the most important essence of the poem.

In *Christabel*, the innocent angel like character, Christabel, while seems to be in Symbolic Order, has retained unconscious desires of unification with her mother. She develops passionate bonds of love with a demon Ghost, Geraldine, whom she desires to compensate her lack and her desire for unification with her mother. However, later on she loosens this affectionate bond as she sees his father’s affection towards the ghost and as she realizes her devilish nature.

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