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Environmental Lessons From the Crime of the Ancient Mariner

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Recent work in what has come to be known as “zombie theory” requires a rethinking of the environmental ethics of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” While the images of the walking dead are perhaps the poem’s most memorable ones, and while the poem itself is perhaps the most famous of literary representations of zombies, nothing by way of ecocritical analysis of these figures in the poem has yet appeared. Critics have discussed death in the poem as related to spirituality and redemption (Dilworth; Hillier; McQueen; Stokes), subjectivity and psychology (Beres; Foakes; Sitterson; Waldo), trauma (Davies), guilt (Jung; Shailer), phenomenology and reader response (Sikora, Kuiken, and Miall), and even environment and apocalypticism (Bergman; Estok “[The Environmental Imagination](#)”; Weng; Kim), but these discussions have not broached the question of natural agencies outside of humanity or of how and why ignoring these agencies can have mortal consequences. The crime of the Mariner is a crime against nature, and the zombie-like crew in their resurrection make clear the poem’s strong ethical position against the misuse of nature.

Understanding the function of the walking dead is essential to recognizing the poem’s environmental ethics. Although it may seem anachronistic to discuss the findings of zombie theory for a poem written before the Haitian notion of zombieism entered into the broad consciousness that it currently enjoys,¹ fascination with resurrections in general and with the living dead in particular have a very long history in Western literature.² Zombie theory explains that a part of the fascination with the living dead has to do with the ambivalence that such figures present. While on the one hand, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry note, “fascination with the zombie [...] is a celebration of its immortality” (396), on the other hand, “there is terror that comes from an identification of oneself with the zombie” (397). The reason for this, they explain, is that

Whereas the vampire and even the intangible ghost retain their mental faculties, and the werewolf may become irrational, bestial only part of the time, only the zombie has completely lost its mind, becoming a blank—animate, but wholly devoid of consciousness. (397)

The walking dead of “The Rime” are “the unconscious but animate flesh” (397) that Lauro and Embry discuss, and these figures are on a direct trajectory of the disorder in nature that flows from the unnaturalness of the Mariner’s fateful arrow.

There are many qualities that theorists have posited as defining the zombie, and although not all of these characteristics necessarily apply in all cases,³ it is the undead’s challenging of boundaries and orders that is most relevant to the ways in which “The Rime” subverts the Mariner’s utilitarian environmental ethics—ethics that undergird his assumption that the world is his to do with as he wishes. The zombie challenges many boundaries but most obviously that of life and death, and “The Rime” asserts with prescience ideas that New Materialists are only now beginning to recognize: namely, as philosopher David Abram notes in a discussion about the material flows between the human body and the environment, and as many others have noted, that “it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends” (46–47). Understanding the material pathways among bodies (human and nonhuman, living and nonliving) is a critical recognition of what defines sustainable living, and the Mariner’s rejection of his connectedness with “all

things both great and small” (Coleridge l. 615) results in a very potent reminder of the disorder that results from abuse of the natural world.

The living dead of “The Rime” fit, though not squarely, the definition of zombies that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers: “They are dirty, stinking, and poorly dressed. They are indifferent to their own decay. They bring about the end times. They are the perfect monster for a human world more enamored of objects than subjects” (274). They are the perfect response to a Mariner who sees an albatross as an object for his whims. Moreover, they involve the Mariner in their ghastly border breaching, and his proximity is clearly a violation of boundaries:

The body of my brother’s son
 Stood by me knee to knee:
 The body and I pull’d at one rope,
 But he said nought to me – (ll. 341–344)

Tim Fulford, in “Slavery and Superstition in the Supernatural Poems,” suggests that the Mariner actually touches his cousin and that in doing so “violates another taboo—that which separates the living from the dead” (351). Certainly, whether he touches the boy or not, there is a clear violation of boundaries here only made possible by the simple presence of these, to use Fulford’s phrase, “zombie crewmates” (351). These zombie crewmates are in a place where no one wants to be, a place of horror and thwarted human agency, where order has dissolved and the rhythms of nature have ceased. This is the promise that the zombies bring. This is the effect of that fateful arrow.

Part of this threat, this vengeance, this mortal response to the unwarranted and, indeed, senseless killing of the albatross⁴ is that nature will become unpredictable. It is a worry that has only intensified over time, as our radically unpredictable weather and climate attests to. The unnaturally “silent sea” (l. 106), the sudden breezelessness on the open ocean (l. 107), and the specter of “the bloody Sun, at noon” (l. 112) produce a situation for which the Mariner and his crew were clearly not prepared on any level: “Day after day, day after day,” the Mariner laments,

We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
 As idle as a painted ship
 Upon a painted ocean. (ll. 115–118)

Without any of the natural breezes and movements of nature, “the very deep did rot” (l. 123). Each of the crew “with heavy thump, a lifeless lump,/They dropped down one by one” (ll. 218–19), and, as they did so, they fulfilled what Cohen identifies as a key function of zombies: they are “our window to the visceral world to which we have always belonged and into which we are absorbed as food for growth” (281). The living dead of “The Rime” are a horrific reminder of human connections and entanglements with nature and nature’s things and of the mistake it is “to imagine that things have no agency, vitality, or autonomy” (Cohen 282). As with everything else associated with the undead, however, nature’s agency is disrupted and perverted, its order shattered, and its habitability ruptured. The dead refuse to die, and the living struggle to live. The Mariner carries his story wherever he goes as a lesson for others—a lesson to which twenty-first century audiences ought to listen. It is a lesson about environmental ethics that grows directly out of the undead—the zombie crew—and what their presence implies.

Certainly, by the end of the poem, lesson learned, order returns, and life goes on. The poem ends with *some* hope for a better set of environmental ethics in the Mariner, with he having blessed the “happy living things” around him in the midst of his ordeal (ll. 282–287); however, this action of blessing the living things itself is as inexplicable and impulsive as his shooting of the albatross in the first place. So, indeed, not much has changed. The Wedding Guest may be “a sadder and a wiser man” (624), clear in the understanding that “he prayeth best, who loveth best/All things both great and small” (ll. 614–615), but it is a biophilic⁵ notion that is running a losing battle in this poem against the less ecologically connected selfishness that the Mariner exhibits in his compulsiveness. As I have pointed out in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, “there is a war between biophilia and ecophobia, and the

current state of the world shows which is winning” (23).⁶ Coleridge was clearly far ahead of his time in his understanding of human compulsions and the apocalyptic threats and zombiescapes⁷ that they potentially pose. It is our time to listen to these lessons from the crime of the Ancient Mariner.

Notes

1. This work was supported by the double-first class discipline cluster “The Chinese Language and Literature and the Global Dissemination of Chinese Culture,” Sichuan University, China.
2. As many of the essays in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (eds. Sarah Juliet Lauro and Deborah Christie) explain, the zombie has its origins in Haitian folklore. See also Hurston for a detailed description of the zombie in Haitian folklore.
3. Laura Wright explains that “zombies [...] are undead figures with a lengthy lineage who have functioned to highlight, satirize, and provide commentary on various social institutions over time, particularly with regard to blind consumerism” (69).
4. Wright’s insight that most contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century zombies are cannibalistic, for instance, certainly does not apply to the living dead of “The Rime.”
5. There is no evidence from the poem to support William Empson’s claim that the Mariner “shot it for food” (300). If this were the motivation, then the action would be neither unwarranted nor senseless, and, as a result, it would be very difficult to explain why the action resulted in so much punishment. But this is not *Job*. The Mariner whimsically shot the albatross, and his lesson is a hard one, hard won.
6. The idea of biophilia originates with Erich Fromm, who defines it as a “passionate love of all that is alive” (365). E. O. Wilson takes up Fromm’s discussion of biophilia and defines it as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (1984, 1), “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (85), and “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life” (1992, 350).
7. I explain in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* that ecophobia is part of a spectrum condition at the opposite end of which is biophilia.
8. I am indebted to Lee Rozelle for this word. He defines zombiescapes as places where “functions have atrophied—diverse species and natural resources eliminated—and only the lowest level of functionality remains” (88).

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