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## The Redeemed Mariner: A Post-Pastoral Reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

### ABSTRACT

In English literature, pastoral is commonly identified as an idealized place where nature serves as a healer, nurturer, and protector. While anthropocentrism received criticism for neglecting the environment, John Barrell and John Bull shook the foundation of the pastoral due to its “traps of idealization”. Terry Gifford revived the term for its befitting usage in the present age. This paper will use Gifford’s pastoral, anti-pastoral, and post-pastoral as a background to finally establish Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as post-pastoral in nature. This study will thus incorporate the holistic vision of the post-pastoral in the poem. The interpretation is built on the idea of ecocentrism that makes the mariner realize the force of nature that lies at the center of creation. As a result, he surrenders his hubris and overcomes his arrogance to give up anthropocentrism. Undergoing a humbling experience, he takes responsibility for his action (of killing the albatross), develops a symbiotic relationship with nature and its creatures (as he blesses the water snakes), and accommodates himself in it. The argument will, thus, be in favour of “mature environmental aesthetics” over “false consciousness”. To strengthen its thesis, the poem will be studied in view of Gifford’s six qualities of the post-pastoral.

**Keywords:** Pastoral; Anti-pastoral; Post-pastoral; Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism; Ecocriticism

### Introduction

“Pastoral” relates to the countryside or lives of people residing in the country (“Pastoral”). Peter Marinelli defines pastoral as “literature which deals with the complexities of human life

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against a background of simplicity”, where simplicity refers to the “country landscape” (3). Conventionally, the word itself calls our imagination to the rural landscape, sylvan worlds, rustic shepherds, beautiful shepherdess, etc. Leo Marx sums up the definition as “No shepherd, no pastoral” (qtd. in *Pastoral* 1).

In the past, Renaissance pastoral dramas and Augustan poetry derived their motifs from early Greek and Roman poems about country life and shepherds. Pastoral, however, has now become “a contested term” (Gifford 4). Greg Garrard, in his book *Ecocriticism*, dismisses the viability of pastoralism as it relies on the “balance of nature” – which does not align with the current ecological thinking (56). Terry Gifford renews pastoral by providing three terms – pastoral, anti-pastoral, and post-pastoral for it to survive under such reproval.

### **Gifford’s Pastoral, Anti-pastoral and Post-pastoral in English Literature**

While discussing pastoral, Gifford’s initial discourse proclaims three uses of pastoral – the first one being the idealized countryside. Nature’s unrealistic picture has been overlooked for a long time due to adherence to the conventional assumption of nature as a healer, protector, and nurturer only. Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* portrays the forest of Arden as a magical place that casts spells on its visitors by healing them of the ills of the artificial court life and thus earns a symbolic stature in the play. While it provides shelter and food to its visitors, it emerges as a problem-solving specialist resolving all the conflicts that emerged in the court. It, for an instance, cleanses the heart of Duke Fredrick and Oliver who once wanted to kill their own brothers. The forest, shepherds, pipe tunes, and flock of sheep form an ideal world in the lap of nature and set a contrast with the court life: it results in the idealization of rural life and the demonization of urban life. Shakespeare, thus, envisions country life as a utopia. However, this notion of pastoral is disputable when we try to evaluate the unrealistic portrayal of the pastoral where a place as dangerous as a forest seems like a sanctuary to the entire group of people who are used to the comfort of courtly life. Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* sees it as the establishment of a narrative that glorifies the people living in rural settings to draw a veil over their exploitation. (32).

Gifford, in addition to pastoral’s definition of “No shepherd, no pastoral”, extends its second usage to “any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (2). William Wordsworth in “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” strikes a contrast between life in the city (where the “weariness” and “fever” of the world weigh people down) and the banks of sylvan Wye (which provide

“tranquil restoration” and “joy of elevated thought”). Holding on to such views, the escapist tendencies of pastoral became common where one could take an escape from reality to take shelter in nature. John Keats in his poem, “Ode to a Nightingale”, for instance, shows such a tendency, where the speaker contemplates living in the woods and escaping the world he lives in. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, in the same way, declares a wish to be carried away by the west wind as the “heavy weight of hours” slows the speaker down. His wish to be “tameless”, “swift” and “proud” again alludes to his escapist tendencies. While these poems idealize the pastoral and uphold the idea of escapism, they also glorify the past. According to Richard Schneider, escapist tendencies tend “to privilege a past when humans were closer to nature, everything was better than today, and there were no problems of everyday living so that one had time to contemplate the meaning of life” (vii)

Lawrence Buell argues, “[...] pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” (32). In literature, pastoral has lived like a true character and presented itself as an idealized world. This is the third use of the pastoral that can be referred to as “pejorative” since Gifford finds this pastoral vision “too simplified and thus an idealization of the reality of life in the country” (2).

Therefore, the pastoral provides a false idealization of nature and thus creates the need for a new term – anti-pastoral – to correct such deceptions.

Gifford’s second concept, anti-pastoral, is a literary development contrasting the traditional pastoral. Matthew Arnold discredits nature as a land of dreams in “Dover Beach”, where the sea “roars” of “melancholy” and waves sing of “human misery”. Here, he upholds the notion of anti-pastoral – providing no illusion of arcadia. Similarly, Ted Hughes celebrates nature’s power but provides no idealization. His poem “Pike” sees the use of the words “malevolent”, “jaws”, “clamp”, “fangs”, “horror” etc., creating a contrast with nature’s protective and nurturing repute. Anti-pastoral rejects the pastoral providing an unromanticized side of nature by treating it realistically.

Gifford, however, goes beyond the concepts of pastoral and anti-pastoral and introduces his third concept – post-pastoral.

To understand the need for such categorization, one must understand its necessity in the ecocritical frame. To Buell, “pastoralism interposes some major stumbling blocks in the way of developing a mature environmental aesthetics” (32). In Gifford’s words, a need for a new pastoral is needed that “has avoided the traps of idealization” and therefore, celebrates and takes responsibility for nature “without false consciousness” (148). “Post-

pastoral” is the term proposed by Gifford to meet the need for a new lens of ecocriticism.

### **The Post-Pastoral Vision in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”**

Since the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, ecocriticism has adopted an “earth-centered approach” as opposed to anthropocentrism where human beings lie at that center. Due to the excessive dependence of the pastoral on rural settings, ecocritics demanded the inclusion of urban areas in the revised definition of environment. The distinction created between rural and urban is also a man-centered approach and nullifies the possibility of a human being residing in harmony with nature like its other components and organisms. With the reversal of focus to nature at the center, a healthy symbiotic association is developed between the environment and all its species. Thus, human consciousness is redirected to the natural world. Human interaction with the non-human world suggests that the non-human world is also significant in the biosphere, which supports the survival of all the species of an environment. Thus, there is an increased awareness of the interdependence between the species and nature.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was published in 1798 in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. It describes the journey of a sailor who has returned from a vicious sea voyage. His impulsive and malignant act of killing an albatross puts him in an unguarded situation – where he must face the wrath of nature and take responsibility for his deeds while undergoing a humbling experience. The setting of the poem mostly consists of a silent annihilating sea, which is the only permanent company the protagonist has, even though it isolates him from the rest of the world. Through the actions of nature and the use of supernatural elements in the poem, Coleridge ushers the poem to a new dimension of pastoral: the post-pastoral.

In other words, beyond the traditions of pastoral and anti-pastoral, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” follows Gifford’s post-pastoral.

An ecocritical reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” shows nature as wild and free, which being at the center, enjoys power over its components. It does not idealize nature as an arcadia where human beings can take shelter irrespective of their actions, and so the mariner does not go unpunished for his actions. It is rather human beings who must accommodate themselves in nature according to its terms and conditions, as the mariner eventually does. The harsh side of nature is thus later balanced by its benevolence which is in line with Gifford’s post-pastoral.

Set out on his journey happily, Mariner realizes the force of nature as he recalls a “storm-blast” being “tyrannous” and “strong”, and thus nature’s

unexpected incomppliance towards him. At this point, Coleridge uses a central figure of “the harmless albatross” who gets killed by the mariner. It ultimately brings on the unfolding cycle of the deed’s results. Wilson describes the Mariner’s experience as “purgatorial” (83). The failure to realize the importance of the non-human world puts the ancient mariner in a dreadful position, where he must surrender his presumptuousness and take responsibility for his actions. While out in the “silent sea”, the mariner and his shipmates stay stagnant in one place day after day. There is no breeze to balance the “hot and copper sky” and “bloody sun”. Incessant thirst with no supply of fresh water makes their throat parched and their lips baked. According to Whalley, the mariner experienced “the most intense personal suffering, perplexity, loneliness, longing, horror, and fear” because of his hellish act. (161) By slaughtering the bird, the mariner acts against God’s divine system. “The mariner’s act of pride and capricious sadism set in motion retributory forces” of nature that he has to acknowledge while witnessing grave repercussions of his wrong actions. (Bostetter 188).

The mariner perceives no beauty in his surroundings: the use of “wonderous cold”, “witch oils”, “horned Moon”, “rotting sea”, etc., shows his depreciation of nature. However, the mariner is acquainted with a sense of human vulnerability. It calls for a need for a symbiotic relationship with nature and its components, which means he must turn the tide and start appreciating nature. When he starts admiring the water snakes as, “happy living things”, he accepts a power superior to himself and is heard by the Holy Mother who sends the gentle sleep from Heaven and the merciful rain that refreshes him when he awakes. His soul is released from his immutable state of suffering, and he gains the state of immanence in wisdom and love. The environment checks that the mariner reaps what he had sown. The mariner, through this journey, achieves a higher understanding or appreciation of nature and its components.

This humbling experience of the ancient mariner is similar to Pi from Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* – a Canadian fantasy adventure novel, published in 2001 after more than two centuries of publishing “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. The key idea of both Martel and Coleridge is to depict nature’s treatment of an individual in the same way he treats nature. Pi starves for a long time to come to a verdict about his boat mate: “I had to tame him,” (Krist). A relationship develops out of love, dependence, and desperation to survive; the tiger eventually becomes equivalent to a friend Pi cherishes or a God he serves, and so the environment favors him. He apprehends the dominion of nature as the center of the world and learns to live harmoniously with other species showcasing his absolute appreciation of nature.

This post-pastoral reading of the poem shows the mariner's acceptance of nature at the center and appreciation of the same with no false sense of idealization. Moreover, he learns to take responsibility for his actions and accommodates himself in nature as he goes on to preach it. This, in essence, is what Gifford's post-pastoral advocates as "mature environmental aesthetics". (qtd. in *Pastoral* 148).

### **"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in View of the Six Qualities of Post-pastoral**

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the editors of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, John Barrell and John Bull, supported the idea of dead pastoral while Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell looked forward to its regeneration and reinvigoration. Gifford's offering of the notion of the post-pastoral in 1994 discredited pastoral's association with idealization only and anti-pastoral's destructive dimensions. It opened the door to the multiple frames of pastoral.

To conform to Gifford's post-pastoral in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", I will relate it to the six qualities of the post-pastoral prescribed by Gifford. It is required to note, however, a post-pastoral work will not necessarily comply with all six of them. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", undoubtedly, clears five of them that I intend to explore here.

The first one is the presence of humility in human beings with respect to nature and recognition of our fragile relationship with it. It aims to reduce the hubris that we may have when we see ourselves in contrast with nature and its elements; it is felt "from a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things" (152). Only then it is possible to shift from an anthropocentric view of the pastoral to the ecocentric position of the post-pastoral. The mariner begins his journey with little knowledge of his relationship with nature. He sees himself in a dominating position and deems nature to be servile – in accordance with his anthropocentric view. However, he soon recognizes his flimsy bond with nature as he meets the perils in the sea. In spite of it, he finds it fit to treat nature as per his wishes – he kills the albatross which again showcases his hubris. Coleridge, however, ensures to turn the narrative to nature. The mariner undergoes a humbling experience and accepts the laws of nature as something that is beyond the control of human beings. As he steers clear of his hubris, he finds beauty in other creations in nature. It has the effect of unifying nature and its creatures. "Kubla Khan", another celebrated poem of Coleridge, similarly acknowledges the uncontrollable force of nature but does not attempt to tame it in any way. It rather shows how human beings can reside in harmony with nature. In Gifford's words, Coleridge "humbled humans with their environment in the face of cycles of elemental power" (153).

Another quality of the post-pastoral with which the poem aligns is the acceptance that we are a part of nature's creative-destructive processes. Pastoral provides a static vision as opposed to the post-pastoral's biocentric view. It offers a balance of the cycle of birth and death and of creation and destruction. The mariner has to repent for his action against the albatross that results in the death of his fellow creature. He shows transformation when he blesses the living souls of "slimy things", which he first found to be repulsive owing to anthropocentricity. So, his deeds that start with the death of an innocent creature are balanced with his valuing of other species of nature. Only this time, he means no harm to them. The co-existence of a hulk as "Death" and his mate "Life in Death", though based on the supernatural forces, provide for a binary aspect. Again, it is nature that salvages him after displaying fervent charge against him, providing a two-fold view of the same. The environment changes from "snowy clifts", "hot and copper sky" and "rotting sea" to the singing of skylarks, "a meadow gale of spring" and a "dream of joy". This creative-destructive notion of nature is in line with Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" where the west wind acts as a destructive but protective force: it might drive the "dead" leaves to their "wintry bed" but it also preserves the "winged seeds" anticipating new life that is eminent in the spring.

Next, the experience at the sea creates a lasting impact on the mariner. He carries his knowledge of nature and its works and imparts them as a duty. He has learned a lesson for a lifetime, and it becomes deeply rooted in his life. His inner possessions are what he has treasured from the external nature during his voyage to the sea. Tirelessly, he keeps on narrating the tale while preaching love for nature in a post-pastoral way as he says, "He prayeth best, who loveth best / Both man and bird and beast." This is in accord with the third principle of the post-pastoral.

There had been a need to provide a voice to nature, as in the case of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" where the speaker offers himself to become the lyre of west wind and blow "the trumpet of prophecy" for it. This was the case with the pastorals. The fourth quality of the post-pastoral proposes to see "nature as culture" and "culture as nature" rather than seeing a culture representing voiceless nature (161). Untamed nature in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" provides a vital opportunity for the mariner's poetic imagination. It is nature that imbibes in him its magical touch as the wedding guest listens to him attentively, his "glittering eyes" entails the controlling power of the sea, and his whole narrative gives us the idea of nature-speaking instead of (only) mariner-speaking, which turns out to be the poem itself. Gary Snyder says that if writing poetry is "the practice of the wild mind", then poetry is nature thinking. When "the external world is

fitted to the mind,” then it is either inching towards our own extinction or adaptation to our environment (234).

Gifford’s fifth element of the post-pastoral is the integrity of consciousness and conscience. Just remaining conscious of our whereabouts or surroundings does not serve the purpose of the post-pastoral – it should reach one’s conscience. D.H. Lawrence’s poem “Snake” sees a transformation of consciousness (“the voice of my education”) into conscience (“I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!”). The mariner perceives his responsibility towards other species through his guilt towards the killing of albatross and his admiration towards water snakes. His consciousness helps him discern that he killed the creature for no reason, and his conscience helps him realize it was wrong. Both work in consonance so that he can find the burden of guilt and humility in his journey. He realizes that it is in nature that he needs to live harmoniously by treating his fellow creatures kindly and taking liability for his actions.

The sixth quality of the post-pastoral contributes to a new dimension of ecocriticism: ecofeminism. Ecofeminists like Carolyn Merchant feel that the exploitation of women has a similar pattern like that of nature (160). Although due to the lack of such a parallel, this quality could not be incorporated in the study of the poem, it does not limit its effectiveness – as Gifford himself declares that it would be rare to find all six qualities in one work of a post-pastoral poet or writer.

### Conclusion

Thus, an ecocentric reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” shows the mariner’s acceptance of nature at the center. He accepts his sin, repents, and alters his perception of nature. We also come to the conclusion that Gifford’s post-pastoral is an important key to providing a new interpretation of the poem. It conforms to the call of the age and satiates contemporary ecocritics. The poem also adheres to the qualities of the post-pastoral formulated by Gifford extending a new insight into the work of Coleridge.

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