Gothic Ocean in S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Abstract

Colonial travel gave a decisive rise both to the proliferation of travel stories and the desire for tourist travel as colonizers and merchants brought stories of new, exciting, but also dangerous worlds. It is this latter, unsettling aspect of travel and tourism that the paper is interested in. Taking into consideration the liquid, unfixable nature of the oceanic setting, the paper will focus on S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) to argue that the ocean represents a Gothic space. Due to its constantly changing nature, which unsettles the boundaries between the material and the psychological, real and imagined, the visible and the hidden, the sea literally and symbolically disorients the protagonist and pushes him toward the realm of the supernatural. The trials of maritime travel depicted as a form of (involuntary) Gothic tourism represent the ordeals of questioning dominant perspectives, of acknowledging the unthinkable, and therefore the transgressive. The ocean becomes a nexus of both the forces of life and death which changes the Ancient Mariner's view of both the world/nature and the humankind; it is also a liminal space where the Mariner is awarded knowledge of the previously unknown. However, this realization is not liberating, but represented as a curse. In relying on the theory of the Gothic, Gothic tourism, and the current perspectives on the maritime environment, the paper will show that Coleridge's Romantic poem offers a Gothic, transcendent, and unsettling view of both the ocean – as a natural and touristic space – and the human nature.

Keywords

S. T. Coleridge • *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* • Gothic • Ocean • Tourism

1. Introduction

Literature and travel have a long-standing connection as literary journeys, both literal – in the form of pilgrimages, grand tours, and everything in between – and metaphorical, which mimic life and foster the growth of human mind. Since its inceptions, colonial travel gave a decisive rise both to the proliferation of travel stories and the desire for tourist travel as colonizers and merchants brought stories of new exciting worlds. However, as Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs contend, "travel broadens the mind, and knowledge of distant places and people often confers status, but travellers sometimes return as different people or do not come back at all" (2002: 2). Much of the danger implied here by Hulme and Youngs arises from the travellers' inability to handle the reality of a radically different environment. Moreover, the journeys of exploration additionally sparked – and darkened – the imagination of those at home with their references to newly discovered animals that sometimes indeed caused the sinking of ships, verifying the travellers' stories of strange and dangerous sea creatures. It is precisely this latter, unsettling aspect of (colonial) travel and tourism that the paper focuses on in its examination of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). Taking into consideration the liquid, unfixable nature of the oceanic setting, the paper will argue that the ocean in Coleridge's poem represents a Gothic space, which destabilizes, frightens, and changes those who voyage. Faced with the vast unknown and forced to question the limits and validity of one's knowledge and beliefs, the human reacts in unpredictable, frequently destructive or auto-destructive ways.

In line with this, the titular Ancient Mariner experiences the ocean as a Gothic landscape, "desolate, alienating and full of menace" (Botting, 2005: 2),

which unsettles him to such extremes that he feels compelled to kill an albatross, the sailors' good omen. In this constellation, the exotic bird is seen as an abject Other by the Mariner, but the Mariner himself is an Other relating to Nature, as he does not fit into the natural world but rather acts against it, and stands as an opposite to it. The senseless murder not only represents a rejection of "social proprieties and moral laws" (Botting, 2005: 2) but it is also an act of self-destructive transgression and excess that results in supernatural occurrences, hundreds of subsequent deaths, and in the Mariner's eternal misfortune, which renders both the story and its setting distinctly Gothic.

2. Gothic Tourism: Travel and Transgression

Although the idea of tourism is generally marked with a sense of pleasure and enjoyment, tourism, a distinctly economic (mercenary) activity, and tourist experience seem to be much more complex. Pointedly, in discussing the phenomenology of tourist experiences, Erik Cohen establishes that to understand tourists merely as travellers for pleasure is "a very superficial view of the tourist" (1979: 179) suggesting that different tourist experiences exist on a sort of a continuum. It seems apt, therefore, to understand tourism as an activity which provides tourists with new experiences (rather than just with pleasure), as it takes into account the multivalent nature of both tourism and the tourists' reactions to new surroundings and cultures.

The specific nature of the Ancient Mariner's voyage is not revealed, but its touristic aspect arises, on the one hand, from its *experiential* nature and, on the other, from its *economic* nature, since his voyage is, in all likelihood, a primarily mercantile endeavour. The Mariner sets sail with hundreds of other sailors from a coastal village or small town, "Below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the lighthouse top" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 23-24[1]). They are not distinguished in any particular way and the poem does not describe the Mariner as being of high birth or rich, which makes it likely that he is simply a member of a crew embarking on a voyage of colonial trade or exploration. The economic aspect of travel is made additionally plausible since for people of his social status travel was prompted by (the need to) work rather than pleasure: "[m]anual labour, industry, whatever has to do directly with the everyday work of getting a livelihood, is the exclusive occupation of the inferior class" (Veblen, [1899] 2007: 8). Moreover, the concept of leisure time, that is "the nonproductive consumption of time" (Veblen, [1899] 2007: 33), which is integral to tourism understood as a purely pleasurable activity, emerges as a full-fledged phenomenon in Great Britain only during the nineteenth century and among the well-off who did not have to work for a living and still could afford to travel.

Travelling motivated by economic or political reasons bears an inherent sense of danger as it implies a strained contact with the Other due to monetary and imperialist propensities, whether they are emphasised or implied: "[t]rade, diplomacy, missionary endeavour, and scientific exploration... all contribute to the British expansion" (Bridges, 2002: 53). Moreover, the European technological expertise enabled influence or domination over non-Europeans as "with technological superiority came presumed intellectual superiority: Europeans could claim to be able to understand and interpret not only the terrain they entered but the inhabitants as well" (Bridges, 2002: 53). Consequently, the idea of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travel is heavily burdened by the notions of colonialism and exploitation, which gives it a distinctly dark quality. For instance, famously and controversially, in Conrad's *Heart of darkness*, Marlow refers to far-away, non-colonized places as "the dark places of the earth" (7). Like Coleridge's late eighteenth-century Ancient Mariner, Marlow is a late nineteenth-century "seaman... a wanderer" (Conrad, [1902] 1994: 8) and both of them have witnessed and participated in horrific acts of violence, which turned out to be transformational in a negative sense, leaving both seamen defeated, reflective, and compelled to retell their respective stories. Whereas Conrad literally speaks of the horrors of imperialist exploitation by referring to "the merry dance of death and trade" ([1902] 1994: 20), Coleridge alludes to the fatality of cross-ocean travels by picturing a ship that turns the ocean into blood: "But where the ship's huge shadow lay, / The charmèd water burnt always / A still and awful red" ([1798] 2000: 269-271).

In addition to these problematic socioeconomic and cultural aspects of travel, the interaction with exotic landscapes is likewise seen as a source of tension, conflict and transformation. Conrad writes about "a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black" ([1902] 1994: 19), which causes "mental changes of individuals" ([1902] 1994: 29), and, a full century before Conrad, Coleridge also focuses on this facet of travelling – the alienating experience. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* highlights the

1 When referring to the poem, the lines are given instead of the page numbers for the reader's easier orientation in any edition of the poem.

LIT&TOUR, Nº 1 (2023)
Páginas 38-46

horrific consequences of a disorienting experience of the ocean as a new medium, of the encounter with unknown flora and fauna, and of extreme climate changes. In this, the external and the internal become intertwined because the stories of the violent and strange events, beings, and locations simultaneously become stories of the transformation(s) of the psyche. Moreover, the Mariner's journey mirrors the fact that tourism is an extension of the mercantile (colonial) endeavour and represents the strained, disorienting, and mercenary relationship between people and (foreign) nature.

It is no wonder then that, as Andrew Hammond recognizes, the transference of the Gothic to travel literature occurs naturally and inevitably in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries (2010: 68). In the same vein, Benjamin A. Brabon recognizes that "strange and uncanny spaces became central to an emerging Gothic aesthetic in the late eighteenth century" (2014: 98), but that they serve to "interrogate the location of the Other and its relationship to a sense of English national identity" (2014: 98). Thus, texts that represent exotic localities serve as a means to comment on what is near and much more personal because in tales of travel, "the Other is located and defined as geographically removed and psychologically internalized" (Brabon, 2014: 99). In other words, in addition to the physical dimension of the reality in which geographical place is the site of contact or even conflict between the European and what is perceived as the exotic, the psyche also becomes a site of struggle between the foreign and the personal.

The uncanny effect of far-away travel is brought about not only by means of the implication of the change of the usual setting and an interaction with Otherness but also by the fact that a sense of displacement may result in irrational – sometimes even murderous – behaviour of the disoriented traveller. In *Gothic tourism*, Emma McEvoy suggests that "[t]ourism has been integral to the Gothic aesthetic from the very beginning" (2016: 4), which explains why people enjoy visiting places of both alleged and real mysteries and crimes; they wish to somehow experience the Gothic. But taking the reality of colonial history of the world into account, it may be suggested that there are hardly any places in the world left untouched by this metaphorical moral darkness, which allows for a possibility to see travel and tourism in general as a phenomenon marked by the Gothic. Additionally, it enables an interpretation of this phenomenon as an act of transgression – of crossing both literal (geopolitical) and moral boundaries – and the view of exotic locations as Gothic spaces. In case of Coleridge's poem of seafaring and the supernatural, the Gothic location in question is the ocean, understood as a vast *natural* body of water surrounding the continents, rather than a geopolitical space divided by countries of the world into smaller parts by means of names and invisible, but legally binding, borders. The ocean is the very embodiment of nature, and although, at first, unconquered nature seems to be represented as the unknown and frightening Other, it is the Mariner who seems to function as the Other – a man fully detached from and unappreciative of nature's beauty and holiness. The violent crisis which arises from the encounter between human and nature transforms the ocean into a Gothic space.

3. Ocean as a Sublime Gothic Space

The ocean's primordial quality makes it a potent location for examining things both natural and supernatural. It is not only that the ocean is essential for life but it also *precedes* life altogether. Namely, in the Christian worldview, when earth was created, it was formless, lifeless, and covered by darkness and water: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. / And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*King James version*, 1991, Gen. 1:1-2). Such a view of maritime space as a vast unpopulated void is echoed, as Tricia Cusack asserts, in a typical "Western conception of the sea as an empty 'uninhabited' space... available for exploration and appropriation" (2016: 1), similar to the infamous notion of non-colonized territories (particularly Australia) as *terra nullius*. In their analysis of the Gothic aspect of the ocean, Jimmy Packham and David Punter similarly contend that due to the inability to phantom the ocean's literal and symbolic depths, people treat it "primarily as surface" (2017: 16), which is vast and empty. The firm, even if incorrect, belief in the notion of the ocean and non-European territories as empty conceptualizes the violent European colonial endeavours as just and justified, and allows for the irrational and immoral perception of indigenous peoples, flora, and fauna as a void: a nothingness that is to be filled with European people, customs, and species. In addition to being frivolous and immoral, such a view of foreign locations and living beings is also deeply conflicted as it negates the reality of the situation and superimposes another, fictionalized view of the state of affairs creating a troubling relationship between people and nature, fact and fiction, as well as a deep rift within any individual forced to live in such a fictionalized reality. Indeed, this imbues the ocean space with a Gothic quality, as, for Botting, "the internalisation of grand Gothic devices is ambivalently externalised, diffused

throughout an everyday world itself composed of fictions" (2005: 71).

The fact that the ocean as a space is ancient and predates all life contributes to its Gothic quality. Namely, the Gothic is "characterized by a specific take on the relation between past and present" (McEvoy, 2016: 5), whereby the (sins of the) past violently erupt(s) in the present, destabilizing it. Both from a temporal and an ecological point of view, nature predates people; from a metaphysical point of view, it bears the stamp of the divine as it represents the material manifestation of the godly. Conrad, for instance, repeatedly emphasizes the ancient quality of the jungle and its "primeval mud" ([1902] 1994: 38), as well as the human role of an impostor in that primordial space: "We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" ([1902] 1994: 51). Humans seem out of place in nature that has not been conquered and devastated by modern "civilization," and their disorientation in this unknown, ancient space – whether Conrad's jungle or Coleridge's ocean – bears the quality of the Gothic. McEvoy explains that, "Gothic tourism has much to tell us about particular places and locality. It is bound up with the way in which we think about our past and our surroundings, and with the ways in which we construct our identities" (2016: 7). Indeed, the central conflict for Marlow and the Mariner is the issue of conceptualizing their identity in the face of realization of the essence of what they understand to be human civilization and values, and the reality of their practice. Furthermore, Coleridge's main protagonist is referred to as the *Ancient* Mariner, which denotes him as a typically Gothic character from the past, forced to haunt the present in order to tell the story of his sin against nature, which was a result of his inability to view the world independently of the traditional misconceptions about life and nature.

Although the stages of divine creation, as represented in the Bible, dispel the notion of the emptiness of the ocean, they only serve to further establish the European sense of claim on foreign territories due to a "fundamentally anthropocentric" (Packham & Punter, 2017: 17) view of the ocean in particular, and nature in general. Namely, the Bible validates that (Christian) humans were given divine right to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (1991, Gen. 1:26). Thus, the cognitive dissonance created by the negation of the evident reality of the existence of indigenous life is "relieved" by recognizing its existence, but only as inferior to that of the Western people. Such culturally established hierarchy of life still fulfils the same purpose as the initial negation of indigenous life: a justification of imperial and colonial endeavours. Yet, the Gothic rejects any form of order and thrives on the destabilization of both the protagonists and their world, and the ocean's liquid nature embodies this strikingly.

Due to its constantly changing character, which unsettles the boundaries between the material and the psychological, real and imagined, the visible and the hidden, the ocean literally and symbolically disorients the Ancient Mariner and pushes him toward the realm of the supernatural. For the Mariner, who engages with the ocean as the unknown, the supernatural offers the only possible explanation of the phenomena he witnesses. He learns through experience, which leaves him utterly changed as his Christian perception of the hierarchy of natural beings is challenged since the maritime creatures turn out to be beyond human control. This confirms Nature's superiority to any cultural construct and exposes the traditional genealogy of knowledge as flawed. The sea, according to Blum, "provides a new epistemology – a new dimension – for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations" (2013: 151). For instance, the sea's unique quality prompted Stanisław Lem to conceptualize alien life in his novel *Solaris* (1961) as a sentient ocean in order to avoid any possibility of anthropomorphization, as the ocean "cannot be reduced to human concepts, ideas or images" (Lem, 2002). Any fixedness is impossible and a fluid conception of the sea as a "material space characterized by movement and continual reformation across all of its dimensions" (Steinberg, 2013: 156) becomes a necessity. This is in line with the Gothic conception of space as one that is deeply unsettling, unfixable and that, according to Botting, "manifest[s] disturbance and ambivalence" as it is "beyond reason, law and civilised authority" (2014: 4). Gothic space is a space of isolation, incarceration, disorientation and power and as such invites self-doubt and vulnerability of the protagonist trapped in a hostile and sublime location (Botting, 2014: 4).

In fact, the ocean's sublimity is one of its most important features. The Romantic worldview, inaugurated in the late eighteenth century by, among others, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, includes an almost sacred reverence for nature and its sublimity, an aesthetic quality that both Edmund Burke in *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant in *Critique of judgement* (1790) see as an alternative to what is beautiful, not as an opposition in the sense of lacking beauty, but as something that overwhelms and awes the observer, an entirely different aesthetic concept. Burke establishes that to know something

LIT&TOUR, Nº 1 (2023)
Páginas 38-46

is to set limits to it, whereas the sublime is limitless and unknowable, as both Nature, God, and life itself, all of which are marked by a sort of "terrible uncertainty" (Burke [1757] 1998: 58). Significantly, "[f]or Coleridge as much as for any Romantic, indeed, the feeling of the sublime is the feeling of life itself" (Vallins, 2003: 4).

To experience this feeling, the young Coleridge, "an aesthetic tourist" (Vallins, 2003: 36), travelled frequently in order to visit places described and represented in literature and art of the period, and many of his writings represent attempts to record the vivid excitement provoked by the instances of his landscape-tourism (Vallins, 2003: 36). In line with the Kantian conception of the sublimity of landscapes, which intuits a connection with the divine (Kant, [1790] 2007: 78-90), Coleridge's works offer both an aesthetic and a transcendental experience of landscape and represent an exploration of "our own ultimate participation in or unity with the essence" (Vallins, 2003: 36-7). Coleridge cannot be said to reject Christianity, but, like most Romantics, he does detect its lack and ambivalence, which arises from its proclamation of humbleness and meekness as major values and its simultaneous highlighting of Christian humans as masters of the material world. The Romantic conception of Nature as divine and sublime is both more inclusive and quite progressive. In this constellation, to sin against nature is to commit the ultimate sin (Matek, 2020: 31), that is, to reject the divine, which, in case of the Ancient Mariner's transgression, results in his enduring curse of immortality.

Finally, Gothic sublimity of the ocean is also reflected in the ambivalent quality of human identity and self-perception, or their lack. Namely, in the fluid environment of the ocean, both the humans and the animals may function as the Other, because Gothic space is "a divided world of divided beings" (Botting, 2005: 8). So, in their rejection to comply with human standards and expectations, the birds and maritime beings become a source of *fear*. The human perceives the maritime beings as the Other; they are seen as frightening and even abject, "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva, 1982: 1). Such a view of ocean life sets humans apart from the natural world, creating "the ambiguous opposition I/Other" (Kristeva, 1982: 7), and "[t]he one by whom the abject exists... *strays* instead of getting his bearings" (Kristeva, 1982: 8). In other words, by observing nature as Other and as threat, the humans become the Other and the threat themselves. The ambiguity of the opposition between I and the Other constitutes the human as the abject Other – the invader. People are not in tune with (maritime) nature and are instead unsettled in their supposed role of a civilized master. Therefore, opposite to the usual mechanism of epistemic violence according to which the colonial subject is figured as Other (Spivak, 1994: 76), in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the Western (European) subject is figured as the Other and, in a more general sense, the human being is constituted as Other to Nature, which represents the norm. In his interaction with the maritime surrounding, the character of the Ancient Mariner cannot intuitively sense harmony with the oceanic nature, and falls back on the two stereotypes that function as tools for Othering: he is at times a victim of the powerful unknown, and at other times he reacts violently to the unsettling surroundings, for which he is ultimately punished.

4. The Ancient Mariner's Crime and Curse

According to Packham and Punter, instances of oceanic Gothic literature offer an "uneasy balance between endless life and lifeless annihilation" (2017: 20). The destiny of Coleridge's Mariner may well be understood in these terms, as his immortality is both endless and, paradoxically, lifeless; he seems not to have any real agency but is trapped by and within his own narrative that compels him to retell and the listener to listen to it: "He holds him with his glittering eye – / The Wedding-Guest stood still, / And listens like a three years' child: / The Mariner hath his will" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 13-16). The supernatural quality of the Mariner's gaze adds a sense of ominousness to his story. Although the lines depicting the departure from the town's port contain the atmosphere of homely happiness and establish the land as a known, safe space marked by Christianity, symbolized by the reference to "kirk," and technology, symbolised by the "lighthouse" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 21-24), the mood switches with the ship's entrance into the open ocean. The sailors lose control of the ship immediately and are left at the mercy of elements: "And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he / Was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his o'ertaking wings, / And chased us south along (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 41-44). No knowledge or navigational technology can help them stick to their course; rather, the ship sails where the storm takes it. From this point on, the Mariner's tale becomes one of suffering, transgression, and the supernatural. Regardless of whether the sea is calm or rough, and whether the weather is warm or cold, the Mariner experiences only exasperation and want, an echo of the reality of the age of exploration marked by psychological and physical stress and horror (Alder, 2017: 8). The ocean is represented as a

"desolate, stormy and wild landscape" (Botting, 2005: 84) in which it becomes impossible for the Mariner to get his bearings.

The fallaciousness of the biblical idea that people are (or should be) given dominion over nature and natural creatures becomes evident in the sailors' utter helplessness against the elements, which is prolonged and emphasized throughout the poem, as the sailors end up being trapped by storm, dead calm, heat, and ice: "The ice was here, the ice was there, / The ice was all around" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 59-60). The South Pole is the first location where the ship is taken since, according to Katherine Bowers, the polar space is figured as having supernatural potential (2017: 74) as "[t]he enormity and hostility of polar space pushes beyond the capacity of the so-called civilised mind, and, in so doing, becomes Gothic space" (2017: 72). In fact, the poem's two major supernatural beings, the Polar Spirit and the albatross, come "From the land of mist and snow" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 134) and instigate the plot.

Nature, symbolized by the character of Polar Spirit, sends her envoy in the form of an Albatross to help the sailors escape the icy ocean, but also to test their moral qualities: "At length did cross an Albatross, / Thorough the fog it came; / As if it had been a Christian soul, / We hailed it in God's name" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 63-66). The bird leads them to safety, saving their lives, and yet, after nine days, the Ancient Mariner fails the moral test by killing it for no good reason: "'God save thee, ancient Mariner! / From the fiends, that plague thee thus! – / Why look'st thou so?' –With my cross-bow / I shot the ALBATROSS" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 79-82). His ominous expression reflects his disturbed psychological status, and the murder he committed sets all other violent and horrific events into action. The Mariner's extreme behaviour may be attributed to the fact that, as Andrew Smith suggests in his analysis of post-apocalyptic narratives, the purpose of such a voyage is self-discovery expressed in temporal and geographical terms (2013: 135). Whereas Smith conceptualizes the frontier as the space of self-discovery, in Coleridge's poem it is the ocean that is represented as "a liminal environmental place in which territory is both mastered and beyond control" (Smith, 2013: 136).

Once he shoots the bird that was, according to Coleridge's marginal notes to the poem, a good omen ([1798] 2000: 71, 79, 91), the Mariner's disrespect for natural beings is revealed as damning: "And I had done a hellish thing" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 91). His disturbed behaviour is a confirmation of Kristeva's claim that those who perceive the abject lose a sense of centeredness, whereby the boundaries between the self and Other break and become ambiguous (1982: 7-8); the Mariner is at the same time the killer of the abject and the abject itself. As Botting contends, "[p]sychological rather than supernatural forces became the prime movers in worlds where individuals could be sure neither of others nor of themselves" (2005: 8), which is one of the traits of Gothic excess, particularly in connection with the examination of "psychological horror and human evil" (Botting, 2005: 69). After their departure from the space of law, "Gothic subjects were alienated, divided from themselves, no longer in control" (Botting, 2005: 8) of passions that are normally policed, but that get free reign through the excesses of transgression.

The Mariner's own curse is caused by the murder, but his crewmates are not immune to the disorienting temptations of the ocean; the moment when they change their mind, and acknowledge that killing the bird was the right thing to do is the moment in which they are damned as well. It shows how poorly they can decipher Nature's acts, since they do not see themselves as parts of Nature, but rather set off from and in conflict with it. They suffer days of heat, thirst, and stillness "[u]pon a painted ocean" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 118). Despite its vastness, the ocean is paradoxically figured as a Gothic space of incarceration and claustrophobia, the sailors trapped on its seemingly impenetrable, "painted" surface, the only aspect of the ocean that they can grasp.

Namely, in their alienation from nature, the sailors are unappreciative of the richness of life in the ocean's depths. As Packham and Punter contend, life in the deep is viewed as Gothic – it is unknown and uncanny, escapes the possibilities of terrestrial language, and is therefore marked by the process of abjection, which remains the only possibility in the human interaction with the incomprehensible depth of the ocean (2017: 28-9). For the Mariner, sea-life is equalled with "rot" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 123) and both the sea and its creatures are "slimy" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 125-126), and therefore abject, just like the albatross, a seabird, who inexplicably incited the Mariner's rage. Furthermore, the morbid hanging of the dead bird on the Mariner's neck represents the typical abject image of the corpse combined with the sense of monstrousness of both the Mariner as the murderer and the sailors who perversely hang the dead bird and thus become engulfed in the abject: "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.... It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (Kristeva, 1982: 3-4). With this, the crew's damnation seems to be inevitable.

LIT&TOUR, Nº 1 (2023)
Páginas 38-46

After days of standstill, the sailors notice a ghostly ship navigated by Death and Life-in-Death, coming to claim them. According to Botting, ghosts populating Gothic fiction represent "signs of internal states and conflicts [rather] than of external threats" (2005: 7). Similarly, for Kristeva, phantoms and ghosts represent phobic hallucinations that are construed by the psyche in an attempt to achieve the idealized social norm (1982: 47), which in the sailors' case may be either death (end to suffering) or redemption. In a game of dice, the nightmare of immortality personified as a woman, Life-in-Death, wins the Mariner (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 185-198), whereas Death gets the crew. The dying sailors curse the Mariner (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 212-223), who is left "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 232-233). He remains isolated and condemned to an eternal voyage on the ghostly ship, suffering isolation and the accusing looks of the dead sailors. Significantly, he feels sorry for his crewmen, whom he sees as "beautiful" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 236), but he still does not take pity on the albatross or see beauty in the maritime creatures. In this, he sins further against nature and is unable to pray: "I looked to heaven, and tried to pray; / But or ever a prayer had gusht, /A wicked whisper came, and made / My heart as dry as dust" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 244-247). He seems completely oblivious as to the nature of his sins. Seeing the curse in the eyes of the dead sailors, he mistakenly believes that their death is the only thing he is guilty of. It is beyond his comprehension that any act of violence against, failure to act positively toward or think respectfully of animals or nature may be sinful. His perspective is strictly anthropocentric and terrestrial, which not only renders the ocean as abject and Other but – although he does not realize it – it also renders him as the abject Other: a sinner against nature.

After seven days and nights of isolated observation and contemplation, the Mariner experiences a moment of illumination and recognizes beauty in all, including the creatures inhabiting the ocean. The slimy water-snakes he once abhorred are revealed to him in a sudden epiphany as immensely beautiful creatures emanating "elfish light" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 275), their skin a "rich attire" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 278). The Mariner yells with joy: "O happy living things! no tongue / Their beauty might declare: / A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessèd them unaware" ([1798] 2000: 282-285). The realization comes to him "unaware", that is, in the form of Divine Grace, as his mind and human language, both operating by means of anthropocentric concepts, cannot conceptualize the sublimity of natural things. He feels (rather than understands) the change because the sublime is primarily a nexus of emotions: "Wonder, awe, horror and joy... expand or elevate the soul and the imagination with a sense of power and infinity (Botting, 2005: 25). Once he opens his heart to the sublime quality of the ocean, he is finally able to pray and the dead albatross falls from his shoulders, symbolically freeing the Mariner of a portion of his guilt. This moment of grace, the pity that his "kind saint" took on him (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 286), changes the nature of the curse, even though it cannot be fully lifted and a part of the price will be paid indefinitely: "The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 408-409). The idea that the sin against nature cannot be expiated is uncannily reminiscent of the current situation regarding both the Earth's climate and mass tourism, as humanity seems to have made mistakes of such scale that certain devastations caused by greed, such as overproduction, overconstruction (of hotels and apartments at the very coastline), and deforestation, cannot be undone, but merely curbed by urgent action. Catherine Lanone's suggestion that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is "a proto-ecocritical text" (2013: 30) confirms that such interpretations and associations are not far-fetched, particularly in line with one of the basic features of the Gothic, namely, that it is pliable enough "to resonate with the cultural anxieties of our time" (Lanone, 2013: 41).

Immediately upon his realization, the Mariner is blessed with the gifts of sleep and rain, which alleviate his insomnia and thirst, and the spectres animate the dead sailors into a "ghastly crew" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 340) who will navigate the ship home. The Polar Spirit, an incarnation of Nature, who has initially sent the Albatross to help the sailors, and who has been following the ship from the South Pole, symbolizes the interconnectedness between the spiritual, the natural, and the human, and suggests that love is the link that binds them together. In killing the bird, the Mariner broke the connection and caused a tragedy of vast proportions. The irony of the situation is in the fact that ultimate cruelty was committed in the name of Christ, which again suggests that people abuse religious ideas to suit their selfish goals:

> By him who died on cross,
> With his cruel bow he laid full low
> The harmless Albatross.
> The spirit who bideth by himself
> In the land of mist and snow,
> He loved the bird that loved the man
> Who shot him with his bow. (Coleridge,
> [1798] 2000: 399-405)

In addition to illustrating how human actions break the link of love between all living beings, the poem may thus be said to implicitly criticize the overtly anthropocentric character of most religions. It is implied that the Mariner's inconsiderate treatment of the harmless bird results from the belief that, when they are declaratively acting in the name of God, people are exempt from responsibility for the consequences of their actions, even if these actions are violent and oppressive toward other living beings or nature. This view, which only takes into consideration the well-being of (certain) humans, is shown to be reductive and harmful for the entire ecosystem.

Ultimately, the sailors get a symbolic sea burial as their bodies sink with the ship in the hometown harbour. Their sin was to accept and condone the Mariner's deed, so they were guilty by association rather than action. They have paid with their life, but the fact that they were each animated by "A man all light, a seraph-man... a heavenly sight!" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 490, 493) suggests that their souls may be saved. The Mariner, however, being an active sinner against Nature, is beyond salvation. He hopes to confess to the Hermit, "He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away / The Albatross's blood" (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 512-13), and although he does tell his tale to the Hermit, an absolution never takes place. Prevented from ever attaining peace, the Mariner, a ghostly and terrifying figure with a supernatural sheen in his eyes (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 3, 13, 618), roams the world retelling his story compulsively:

> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns.
> I pass, like night, from land to land;
> I have strange power of speech;
> That moment that his face I see,
> I know the man that must hear me:
> To him my tale I teach. (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 582-590)

The tale he tells is one of universal love, a moral he learns the hard way. Despite the fact that people lack awareness of the harmony and equality between all living beings and their natural surroundings, which is only made worse by the anthropocentric values and beliefs, the respect for all things natural is the only way to ensure survival:

> He prayeth well, who loveth well
> Both man and bird and beast.
> He prayeth best, who loveth best
> All things both great and small;
> For the dear God who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all. (Coleridge, [1798] 2000: 612-617)

5. Conclusion

In *Gothic tourism*, Emma McEvoy suggests that ghost walks are performative acts conjuring other versions of the town into being by means of storytelling and the tourists' imagination (2016: 125). Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* may be said to conjure a new view of the ocean in a similar way. The trials of maritime travel depicted as a form of Gothic tourism, that is Gothic *experience*, represent the ordeals of questioning dominant perspectives, of acknowledging the unthinkable, and therefore the transgressive. In the Mariner's tale, the ocean is an unsettling, Gothic space, teeming with abject life. Its darkness is underlined by the implied horrors of imperialism and colonialism connected with the eighteenth-century travel. However, the Mariner's actions constitute himself as an abject Other in relation to Nature.

The ocean is primeval and embodies Nature itself with its sublime quality, which transcends mere beauty, and terrifying power. Inculcated with traditional views, the Mariner finds himself disoriented at sea and unable to appreciate the overwhelming sublimity of maritime space. Instead of recognizing all forms of life as sacred, the Mariner irrationally and haughtily kills the benevolent albatross and despises other maritime creatures, whereby an unbridgeable gap is constructed between himself and the ocean, that is life.

The ocean's darkness is reflected in the Mariner's actions, designating not only the exotic location and life as Other but the Mariner as well. He is the Other to Nature, a barbaric, murderous being falsely believing to bear the stamp of light and civilization. In this way, the ocean becomes a nexus of the forces of life and death, a complex and fluid location where identities are upset and made ambiguous. Additionally, the ocean becomes a liminal space between nature and civilization, good and evil, where the Mariner is, through the divine grace of Nature, awarded knowledge of the previously unknown. Yet, the knowledge and insights gained during his ocean adventure do not liberate the Mariner nor exonerate him from his sins. His enlightenment and immortality are not represented as a reward but as a curse. Guilty of many deaths, which are a proof of his rejection of love and life, the Mariner is forced to roam the world for all eternity, retelling his cautionary tale about the necessity of universal love and ecological respect.

LIT&TOUR, Nº 1 (2023)
Páginas 38-46

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