

*Not Too Much Too Young.*¹

First Encounters with the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

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Many of us remember how a first artistic encounter with a poem, novel, or play inspired a critical appreciation over the decades that followed. What if, instead of tracing the influence of a single work, we pitted first encounters of texts against each other, in an experiment to gauge their likeability, and potential longevity? Could S.T. Coleridge win such a literary blind-date contest? And what if the subjects in this experiment were younger than Coleridge’s usual first audience of mid-teen and college students? Would these young pupils even consider Coleridge’s poetry above other authors? And if they did, what would they make of it?

Context

This contribution to Coleridge’s 21st century relevance describes the experiment that I ran with some of my classes in a London secondary school (pupils between ages 11 and 18). As this group’s class teacher, and also working towards a part-time PhD, I wanted to know if Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” could compete with popular contemporary fiction, and from their reception of the poem what we might learn about the next potential generation of Romanticists.

Students were introduced to five new different texts including Onjali K Rauf’s stories of a Syrian refugee Ahmet in ‘The Boy at the Back of the Classroom,’ and his novella ‘The Star Outside my Window’ which details domestic abuse. Also introduced were Philip Pullman’s ‘Northern Lights,’ Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,’ and a piece titled ‘I pledge to Read’ using footballers from the premier league. In terms of pedagogical approach, the non-Coleridge text choices were influenced by National Literacy Trust ‘Reading for Pleasure’ initiatives,² run in collaboration with the Open University ‘Reading for Pleasure’ (RfP) programme,³ for which I was a secondary school ambassador at the time.

The pupils were invited to experience an extract from the start of each of the four texts and then chose independently which one to work with for a further four hours. If they chose longer texts “Rime,” or “Northern Lights,” the students would not be required to finish the text.

Would anyone choose Coleridge’s archaic, long, strange poem? I was certainly not impartial and secretly hoped they would but my expectations were low. Not one of the pupils had previously heard of Coleridge—or Keats, or

¹ This description of a new classroom activity was first presented at the roundtable discussion ‘Coleridge at 250’, at the Summer 2022 Coleridge Conference, Kilve Court, Somerset on Fri 29th July.

² <https://literacytrust.org.uk/secondary/>

³ <https://ourfp.org/>

Shelley or Byron—and only one vaguely of Wordsworth. None could remember any experience of Romantic poetry. I decided that a small handful of the 60 pupils opting for “Rime” would be a pleasing outcome!

Before discussing the results, I will give some further context. The competition involved eleven-year-old readers during a reading week in the summer academic term of 2020. The date is important. UK schools closed for three Covid-19 lockdowns during spring 2020, autumn 2020 and early in 2021. The pupils I taught were at home, ‘meeting’ peers and teachers in online Teams calls. By the time of the Coleridge reading experiment in June 2020, the students had missed four months of formal ‘in person’ schooling. This experiment took place entirely online, in a virtual week, during time dedicated to English ‘lessons’ in their homeschools’ schedule.

Of course, the more typical school reading week activities, of author talks, book presentations, themed or costume days, was not possible. A novel approach was required. Disseminating texts and gathering pupil responses was just one of the issues to overcome, as during covid lockdowns, pupil engagement with shared educational material and student mental health varied widely. My new educational practice included the experience that (almost) no pupil wanted to switch on their cameras nor would be required to by staff. For Coleridge’s “Rime” to perform well in this online non-contact reading week competition, it would have to grab and sustain a student’s attention, plus the student would need to provide evidence of their knowledge and engagement with the poem, at a time in their educational careers when they had the least accountability.

The Results Are In!

So, onto the experiment results: who and what was most popular? While the Rauf books overall gathered the most readers (at a total of twenty-one), “Rime” attracted an impressive thirteen pupils⁴. This meant over 30% of the participating cohort chose the travails of an ancient mariner as their primary text to work with after having read the four opening extracts. This significantly surpassed my expectations. It trumped Pullman’s contemporary best-seller and a video message from famous footballers which each pooled single figure results.

Arguably, in Coleridge’s favour was the version of “Rime” used in the experiment. It was the revised 1817 version but in the non-standard format of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* Big Read.⁵ The Big Read project presented the poem through a highly accessible online platform. In this version, the poem’s seven parts were chunked down into thirty-three sections, each read aloud by different performers including Marianne Faithful, Jeremy Irons, Iggy Pop and others. At less than a minute each, they were rather like tweets. Each reading was accompanied by evocative oceanic and Antarctic sound recordings, plus

⁴ About one third of pupils did not provide evidence of their online participation so theoretically, there could have been more Coleridge readers.

⁵ <https://www.ancientmarinerbigread.com/readings>

commissioned artworks, all intended to increase the text's accessibility. It is fair to surmise that this helped the students of this experiment.

After a very respectable second place, the question is what can we glean from the responses of these young Coleridgeans? The poetry tasks offered to students centred on personal interpretation and language analysis. This included composing descriptive vocabulary for each section that they read in order to demonstrate narrative engagement and understanding of the text. Students were asked to identify sections that struck them as dramatically effective and attempt to explain why. Finally, students made voice recordings of these commentaries, accompanied by an oral reading of lines they found dramatically striking, for which they were told *choose what you think is a suitable tone and rhythm*.

Overall, the students engage enthusiastically with an unfamiliar 230-year-old poem. They do not get all details correct. Their sound recordings show that they were clearly grappling with unfamiliar vocabulary: 'wary' for 'weary' ('there passed a weary time'), and 'slacked' instead of 'slaked' ('with throats unslaked'). One student offers an alternative title: *'I really like the poem the Rime of the Ancient Marina.'*

One student shows impressive diligence, spending considerably more time than three hours reading the whole poem, and devising a word bank for each of the version's thirty-three mini-sections. Their word sequence moves through a suggestive sequence of evocative adjectives, reflecting their experience of the poem. It includes: *'violent and raging', 'melancholic and shocking', 'peculiar and destructive', 'magnificent and horrific', 'slimy and sticky', 'lonely and frightening', 'slithering and sudden', 'lifeless and depressing', 'peaceful and harmonious', 'mind-controlling and guilt', 'frightening and stone-like', 'swift and relieved', 'saved and forgiven' and finally 'talkative and secretive.'* The word choices convey the student's confident grasp of plot and the Mariner's emotional journey of 'protracted suffering' (Perry, 2014).⁶ Their structured response, building a system to handle myriad descriptive experiences, validates sub-dividing "Rime" into shorter chunks – an approach that could also effectively manage other narrative poetry including "Christabel" for example. They then read and recorded the three stanzas beginning 'And now the storm blast came' and ending 'As green as emerald' (ll.41-54).⁷

Finally, they give a personal response, the extract of which (below) connects with the opening's triangulation of pathetic fallacy, colour symbolism and intense negative emotions:

So, this is my favourite part of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner because the imagery used in this section is very vivid and the narrator is describing his perilous journey and there is a storm raging above in the sky conveying a sense of desperation, a sense of sadness and trying to escape. It's very like the colours used - the simile as green as emerald, you can visualise that, which is why I like that section.

⁶ Seamus Perry, "An introduction to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,"

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner>.

⁷ <https://www.ancientmarinerbigread.com/reading/3> - there read by Samuel West.

In the three tasks, they show a wide vocabulary and articulate expression for age 11, particularly when we consider their recording was freely spoken, not read from a script. Initially I supposed that the archaic vocabulary would influence those who had chosen ‘Rime’ creating a self-selected group of more linguistically able, academically aspirational eleven-year-olds. In the end, that was not borne out. Academic strength was not a dominant feature of those who chose the poem. The 33% who chose to work with “Rime,” after reading all the taster texts, were from across the English attainment spectrum, including lower performing students measured by previous assessments and written homework tasks.

Another student, recently arrived in the UK, with some spoken but no written English, and also with special educational needs, nonetheless chose “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” rather than the footballer video message or immigrant story, despite both being told in a conversational style. Having no written English, LB improvised a personal response to “Rime”, using speech to text software. LB submitted two sentences about the poem’s opening, their first written words at school in the language of their new country. They are copied verbatim below:

‘Glittering’ - this word made me feel like there was something of great importance like diamond in museum. And ‘Bright’—this word made me feel that good idea was said in the poem and also, I had different feeling that it was light shining at something.

That a non-writing and early reader in English could appreciate nuance that Coleridge’s word ‘bright’ was illuminating something, in this case a moral truth the Mariner must repeatedly tell, corrected my original elitist supposition that the “Rime” would appeal mostly to academic students. Instead, the poem appeared universally accessible at this age group, each finding varying levels of stretch and challenge. The young readers successfully accessed the poem through both its vivid natural imagery and narrative plot devices which substantiates Coleridge’s suitability to an earlier years’ curriculum than is traditionally taught.

This was borne out by another student AA who had a reading age of approximately nine years old and had not produced any substantial written work that year. They had not read a book since Year 4 of primary school, but they enjoyed the poem’s opening because *‘it made me feel calm and I was enjoying it a lot, but it also made me feel excited to find out what was going to happen next.’* It reminds us of the importance of a strong start in young people’s reading experience, where the intensity of the text grabs the individual’s attention, so they are motivated to continue. The unfamiliar language, interestingly, did not deter the student voluntarily recording themselves reading a section aloud.

Neither was unfamiliar poetic expression a barrier to determining meanings as we see in one final example of pupil interpretation. This student read the poem up to the appearance of the spectre bark, providing a structured personal response to the sequence of events from the Mariner’s meeting of the wedding guest, initial voyage recount, storm and aftermath of crossbow and albatross

killing:

The opening of the poem made me feel curious and puzzled. The third reading left me feeling anxious because of the storm and tense for what was to come. The 4th reading left me feeling relieved they had managed to get through the ice and glad that the ice had split. The 5th reading made me feel surprised that he shot the albatross and horrified at why he would shoot it.

All these students experienced their first encounters with “Rime” under comparatively limited teacher guidance or explanation because of Covid-related school closures. They missed, for example, the usual supportive interactive structures of conferring, prompting, and open questions that develop engagement. Regardless, pupils successfully navigated the poem’s changes in setting and tone at climactic moments. The same student goes on to focus on characterisation related to the pivotal moment of the killing:

In the 6th reading I felt pleased that they felt bad for killing the bird but also sorry for him that he has to deal with the guilt. The 7th reading made me feel sad for the bird and woeful because now the sea is just silent. The 8th reading made me feel content because it is just them and the ocean but also lonely thinking about the big sea and the small me. The 9th reading made me feel ashamed of the man who had killed the albatross but sad that he has to be treated so.

They show empathy for the moral complexity and symbolism of the albatross’ shooting, expressing that they feel ‘horrified’ with shame but also pity for the mariner. Anya Taylor has discussed how ‘“The ‘Rime” plays with shifting voices, even within the Mariner’s own voice, where the mariner is by turn objective, shocked, confessional, anguished, dreamily unconscious, skeptical, pious, and resigned’.⁸ The student was aware of a multi-layered narrative, responding in another place to the hope experienced at the spectre bark’s impending arrival before the dashing of that hope as Life-in-Death and Death destroy the Mariner’s fellow sailors.

The 10th reading made me feel joyful that there was a sail but also worried if they were going to help or not. It made me feel fortunate that a sail had come and glad that they would be saved.

They then recorded their reading of the spectre bark’s (initially) promising arrival, beginning ‘There passed a weary time’ and concluding ‘I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, / And cried, A sail! a sail!’⁹

This student’s response to their ‘first encounter’ with poetry suggests that we might challenge the perception of Coleridge’s place in Romanticism courses primarily for older scholars. In considering the Mariner’s dangers, students were able to absorb his situation in making sense of these dramatic episodes. The same student spoke about the section they chose without a script for three continuous minutes, capturing the sailors’ ecological desperation, petitioning

⁸ Anya Taylor, “Coleridge’s Self-Representations” in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2012.

⁹ <https://www.ancientmarinerbigread.com/reading/10>, read by Beth Gibbons.

transformation for survival, and the hope that desiccation will give way to rescue:

So that was reading number 10. That was my favourite part so far because it seems as if there is no hope; they have run out of water, it says 'each throat was parched, ' and also how 'there gazed each weary eye.' They are losing hope for themselves. They have no interest. They are stuck in this ocean, all alone, so things aren't looking good at all, so you are thinking OK, what is going to happen next? how are they going to get out of this? So, when he says: 'a sail, a sail,' it's a new spark of excitement as they see this boat coming towards them and you think OK, is this boat going to help them? Are they going to be saved? So, what's going to happen? It's quite exciting in the story and you are feeling quite tense. And that is why you want to read on, you want to find out what happens to them after they are in this ocean - Are they just going to be left there? So, this is definitely my favourite part so far... it really hooks you in, this point, and it really defines the rest of the poem because they have just been in this ocean so far.

Those familiar the entire poem (and for some readers that is very intimately) may mark with irony a child's innocent pleasure in imagining the crew will be saved. But their transcript also shows hesitation in committing completely to a rescue narrative. They worry: *'Are they just going to be left there?'* They tap into the Mariner's ambiguity, his 'whirl of multiple consciousnesses,' (Taylor, 2012) affirming the poem's enduring ability to evoke different meanings. Even though the student clearly desires a successful conclusion, their repeated questions imply internal doubt. And saying: *'this part 'really defines the rest of the poem,'* when the 'part' in question includes speculation about a potential rescue, shows a sensitivity to the continued emotional uncertainty that accompanies the Mariner's spiritual salvation.

Offering the "Rime" without information on Coleridge's historical or personal context did not seem a limitation to students' engagement with its narrative or characterisation. As one of the editors of the Big Read project said, 'You say those lines, and they're there!' The students did not ask for biographical or historical information. They responded to richness of language choice and imagery, and to the moral uncertainties of the Mariner's predicament. Being 'there' with the lines was therefore a product of their imagination. And while we should note that it was not only words on the page that students experienced, but also the supporting tonal inflection, artwork and sound clips of The Big Read (some of which is strange and powerful), when it came to recording their reactions, the students drew solely from the poem's text. Interestingly, they did not incorporate the entangled voice, art or music that helped them access the poem when describing their personal responses. A separate activity connected specifically to the audio-visual aspect of the reading could be a valid addition should the exercise be repeated.

The primary text-centric approach also limited discussions informed by wider scholarship, such as recent ecological or post-colonial interpretations. One geographically aware student commented on the coldness of the South

Pole. Otherwise, there were no cultural reference points in the interpretations of the group who chose “Rime,” possibly due to a flaw of the task design. Anonymised in this article, the students were representative of their London classroom at just over 50% ethnic diversity and multi-faith, predominantly Jewish then Christian. An attendee of the Friends of Coleridge conference suggested putting these students in dialogue with older pupils who had memorised the poem at school in keeping with standard educational practice. Perhaps we could bring students and Coleridge scholars together, to broaden the children’s experience with the opportunity to explore assumed knowledge in age-based teacher and pupil interactions.

Concluding thoughts

Whilst the ‘Rime’ did not technically win the popularity contest, it demonstrated surprising appeal at a variety of linguistic confidence levels. The experiment taught me that a complex narrative poem, one I had assumed would appeal to ‘Higher Learning Potential’ students, was also engaging to students with significantly different vocabulary range and English language capabilities. Neither was the lack of prior study in Romantic poetry a barrier to entry. The students’ interpretations were tied up in their affective experience. I wondered whether engaging imaginatively and meaningfully with the “Rime’s” complexity might lead to further creative and independent study. For example, students could study the artists and readers of their favourite sections from the Big Read version. The student who produced a descriptive word bank could develop it into original poetry of their own, or a creative piece or a scene from a play. It could also be interesting to see pupil responses in first encounters with other poems, perhaps “Frost at Midnight” or “This Lime Tree Bower My Prison” and their themes and vivid tableaux of family, friendship, connection and solitude. A further surprise was the level of personal investment given by pupils to an online, self-directed activity during home-based schooling during Covid. They welcomed Coleridge into their locked-down homes with enthusiasm. At one point I wondered if pupil responses were being influenced by the loneliness, isolation and helplessness many communities experienced, making them more intrigued and empathetic to the mariner’s plight? With hindsight, I could have set a specific question about lockdown and the Mariner’s plight to tap into the personal experiences they shared in other writing tasks during Covid-altered schooling.¹⁰

I probably won’t know if any of these students, the class of 2033 or thereabouts, will undertake Coleridge studies in the future, or whether they will remember their first encounter with “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, escaping

¹⁰ Other projects include ‘Lockdown Voices,’ a web-based platform I built for creative writing responses to 2020 covid schooling, circulated with staff and parent communities (not public as pupils are identifiable by name on the site). Another activity was ‘Dear Face Mask’ letter writing in 2021 shown on a poster created for BARS Conference (August 2021) openly accessible via:

https://www.canva.com/design/DAELAeiQPZo/eY8FuSiHp35Z7VkPAcxnjg/edit?utm_content=DAELAeiQPZo&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton

to a 'land of mist and snow' from their indoor summer lockdown caverns. Hopefully one of them will work on multi-platform, artistic collaborations to open Coleridge's journalism, philosophical writing and plays to new audiences, and encourage continued relevance to the next generation.

You can access student voices sharing readings and interpretations via this link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SxKo6bcwuA>