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За издавачот:
проф. д-р Луси Караниколова -Чочоровска

Издавачки совет
проф. д-р Дејан Мираковски
проф. д-р Лилјана Колева-Гудева
проф. д-р Луси Караниколова -Чочоровска
проф. д-р Светлана Јакимовска
проф. д-р Ева Ѓорѓиевска

Редакција и администрација
Универзитет „Гоце Делчев“-Штип
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TRAUMA, LOSS AND MEMORY: HAUNTINGS IN COLERIDGE`S "RIME" AND BYRON`S "GIAOUR"

Natalija Pop Zarieva[1], Krste Iliev[2], Dragan Donev[3]
[1]Faculty of Philology, University Goce Delcev - Stip
natalija.popzarieva@ugd.edu.mk
[2]Faculty of Philology, University Goce Delcev - Stip
krste.iliev@ugd.edu.mk
[3]Faculty of Philology, University Goce Delcev - Stip
dragan.donev@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract: This paper delves into the traumatic experiences of the central characters in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and George Gordon Byron's *The Giaour*, positioning these works as compelling narratives of trauma. By examining the Mariner's guilt-ridden journey and the Giaour's vengeful quest, the paper explores how these figures' transgressions and subsequent losses shape their identities and the ways in which they navigate their traumatic experiences. The paper will consider the role of memory in both poems, analyzing how the characters' recollections of past events haunt them and contribute to their ongoing suffering. Additionally, it will investigate the concept of redemption, examining whether the Mariner and Giaour are able to find solace or healing through their narratives. Ultimately, this paper aims to shed light on the complex ways in which trauma can be expressed and processed through literary texts, offering valuable insights into the human experience of suffering and resilience.

Key words*: transgression, trauma, loss, memory, narrative, identity.*

Introduction

Originating from the Greek word for "wound," "trauma" originally referred to a physical injury rather than a psychological one. Although its roots are in medicine, the concept of trauma began to gain prominence in literary studies in the 1990s, notably through works like Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994), Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1995) and Vander-Kolk *The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma* (1996). Additional writings by Ronald Granofsky (2012), Hartman (1995), and others further integrated the term into the humanities. In literature, trauma often serves to give voice to experiences that are not entirely understood or expressible. The American Psychological Association defines trauma is as: "An emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. It can also be caused by repeated exposure to stressful events…" (APA,

2023) Whereas, the clinical definition given by American Psychiatric Association is: "A deeply distressing or disturbing experience." (DSM-5, 2013). This paper offers a reading of the above mentioned texts by Coleridge and Byron from the lens of traumatic experience and trauma narratives.

At first glance *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Giaour* works are utterly dissimilar in their setting, style, theme and characters. The former revolves around an ambiguous sea voyage with a violent climax event: the old Mariner shoots an albatross—an action that is followed by multiple deaths on the ship and perpetual suffering for the Mariner. *The Giaour*, on the other hand, is set somewhere in the Ottoman empire, the region of Morea, now modern Greece, and rests upon a love triangle between the Turkish chief Hassan, Leila—one of the women from his harem and the Giaour, a character who has no name, but as his nickname suggests someone who is 'the other' in the Muslim world. The plot reaches its climax when the Giaour kills Hassan to avenge the death of Leila, who was purportedly drowned by Hassan's men for her infidelity. The title characters' lives seem distinct and unparalleled, but they share multiple experiences: both are transgressors who are guilt-ridden, and experience anguish in physical and psychological sense, which makes them relate their story to a listener. We propose that the main characters in both texts have undergone trauma, and their depiction of their surroundings illustrates the impact of these events on them. However, the protagonists show different ways of coping with the traumatic experience. The Mariner grapples with his guilt over killing the albatross and subsequently his crewmates, which he expresses repeatedly as a means of reconciliation: the whole poem is voicing his narrative over and over again. The Giaour is "locked in a closed loop of time" (Lussier, p. 108) and "this disconnection of the Giaour from time through entrapment in memory splits off his universe from that of others, leaving him enfolded within an eddy of spacetime" (p. 112). Lussier further explains, "What the present moment writes on the Giaour's countenance will only be strengthened with time" (2000, p. 114). This paper seeks to explore how Coleridge's Mariner and Byron's Giaour both experience trauma, yet diverge in their approaches to overcoming it.

Coleridge's Ghostly Mariner

Both texts present the story after the great traumatic event has finished and the characters deal with trauma through storytelling- offering their perspective of the events that led to the traumatic experience and the trauma itself, so we are focusing on the story of the Mariner in Coleridge's poem and the story that Byron's Giaour relates to the Friar during his final days in the monastery, and their difficulty to comprehend the traumatic events. The first question that needs to be addressed is what are the traumas of the Mariner and Giaour essentially.

The reasons for the Mariner's trauma appear to be ambiguous. It is a fact that he experienced many distressing experiences on his journey: from the ship being

stuck in the ocean without water, then being entrapped in the frozen icy waters; the uncanny figures of death and life-in-death followed by him biting of his arm; the ensuing inexplicable sudden deaths of all the crew; and finally leading to the sinking of the ship. Despite the continuous stressful experiences, some of them do not have direct connection to the basis of the story. We can include, in effect, three overwhelming traumatic events that befall the Mariner on his journey: the action of killing the albatross, the appearance of the spectral figures, and the deaths of the Mariner's shipmates. The anticipation of the uncanny can provoke terror that can be traumatic experience, but it can be excluded as it has a metaphorical significance and acts as a plot mechanism to propel the action. These multiple traumas impose the question whether the Mariner's actions reflect a Christian view of trauma, which is most commonly explored by critics, where the guilt of/over a sin leads to confession, penance, and redemption, or if the reason for his guilt may be found in the collective deaths that he witnessed but survived. The shooting of the albatross is the Mariner's transgression and is often considered the central traumatic event. What is true is that it triggers a chain reaction of suffering, guilt, and isolation, but close reading of the text does not reveal signs of great shock after the Mariner committed it. What we witness is the sailors looking at him with blame in their eyes

"And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow." (lines 91-94)

A few lines below, the Mariner reiterates the premise that he had killed the bird, but this time there is no blame as the bird had brought them bad weather: "Then all averred, I had killed the bird/ That brought the fog and mist." (lines 93-4) The Mariner does confirm the fact that he felt guilt over this deed, but because the other sailors judged him: what evil looks/ Had I from old and young! /Instead of the cross, the Albatross/ About my neck was hung," (lines 139-42) and bearing the albatross on his neck is symbolic representation of his guilt. The first signs of internal suffering and trauma, in fact, appear just after the death of the two-hundred sailors.

"Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I." (lines 233-40)

This paper proposes that the major traumatic experience is engendered because of the sight of all the dead men lying next to his feet, and he is left as a sole survivor. The author uses poetic irony to depict the Mariner's guilt by emphasizing the beauty of the dead bodies and the Mariner who continues to live like the "slimy things" in the sea. In the dead men's eyes, he can see the curse which is more horrible than "an orphan's curse." Albeit, we are led to assume they curse him for killing the albatross, it is never definitive that there is a causal link between the death of the albatross and the sailors' death. Especially having in mind that the determining moment of the sailors' life and death depends solely on pure luck — a die game between two spectral figures. Thus, a reasonable conclusion is that they blame him for staying alive, whereas they need to die. Or rather, he "sees" the blame in their eyes. But when it comes to perception, it can be an elusive experience that is idiosyncratic of the perceiver. The emphasis on the visual proof of his guilt: "Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse, /And, yet I could not die," (lines 262-4) rather affirms his own guilt-ridden feelings as a response to the traumatic incident— known as the guilt of the survivor. The feeling of guilt associated with trauma often fuels intrusive memories, bringing the horrific event back to the forefront of a survivor's mind. According to Cathy Caruth (Trauma: Explorations in Memory,) "Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory." (1995, p. 151) APA lists intrusive thoughts in the form of repeated, involuntary memories of the traumatic event as the first symptom of trauma (DSM-5, Fifth Edition). The whole poem is in fact a narrative based on the Mariner's memory. The Mariner starts his narrative in an eerie manner: "There was a ship," (Line 1) he says, intersecting the three wedding guests on their way to a wedding ceremony. They don't know him, he does not know them, but he addresses only one of them, or does he only feel the need to relate his traumatic experience to whoever seems to listen? When the Wedding guest asks him why he looks so pale, the old sailor replies: "With my cross-bow/ I shot the ALBATROSS" (lines 81-2). Blaming oneself or others for the trauma is considered as a consequence of trauma (DSM-5, Fifth Edition). The response does not seem to be adequate to the question and does not offer complete understanding for his paleness. Here, we examine *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with a focus on the challenges the Mariner faces in crafting a cohesive and meaningful narrative to elucidate his traumatic experiences. When he swoons, he hears two voices:

"But ere my living life returned,
I heard and in my soul discerned
Two voices in the air.
'Is it he?' quoth one, 'Is this the man?
By him who died on cross,
With his cruel bow he laid full low
The harmless Albatross." (lines 396-402)

The lines are incomprehensible as to what is happening: who the voices are, what the association with the one who died on the cross is, or how these are linked to killing the albatross. Distressing dreams and flashbacks of the traumatic event are common effects according to APA (DSM-5, Fifth Edition). From an aesthetic point of view, we can make a symbolic significance, but as a narrative memory it is illogical, unclear and inconceivable. Narrative memory comprises mental constructions that individuals employ to comprehend their experiences (Janet, as cited in Caruth, 1995 pp. 153). According to Janet, the seamless integration of experiences into established mental frameworks is influenced by the subjective evaluation of the unfolding events. Familiar and anticipated experiences are effortlessly incorporated into existing cognitive structures without requiring conscious attention to specific details. In contrast, unsettling or unfamiliar experiences may not readily conform to pre-existing cognitive frameworks. Instead, they might be recalled with heightened vividness or may resist complete assimilation into the existing mental structures. When we first meet the Mariner, all the traumatic events have finished. The story he tells the Wedding guest is him reliving the past again. Yet, the trauma disrupts the Mariner's memory, leading to fragmented and distorted recollections of the events. His hallucinations, such as the skeletal sailors and the water snakes, the voices that he hears when he loses conscience, further blur the lines between reality and his internal torment. Nevertheless, his compulsion to tell his story is both a burden and a form of healing. By reliving the trauma, he seeks to understand it and find forgiveness.

The Mariner, undergoing through traumatic experiences, tries to define himself according to the experience. When he unwarily blesses the slimy creatures in the sea, a Christian act of blessing and love towards all beings on Earth is enacted. Coleridge does not fail to make it ambiguous, though, as within the sea snakes there lies the symbol of the Biblical snake and its alignment with evil and the originators of sin on Earth. Thus, the Mariner's blessing, parallels invocation of evil powers, such ones for example that will help him stay alive when the ship sinks or keep the Wedding guest hear his story despite him wanting to be part of the wedding, and afterwards leave him a "sadder" person. In his trauma narrative, he often recalls the blame in the sailor's eyes, and guilt overwhelms his entire being, so he wishes his own death and identifies himself to a person who would rather die. Guilt is one of the symptoms for PTSD listed in APA. His narrative reveals him as a bold Mariner "happily" sailing on the first voyage into the unknown waters, to an active destroyer of a "Christian soul", then performing a dynamic self-biting act to save the ship, and lastly claiming that the best thing in life is to be with people "To walk together to the kirk, /And all together pray." (lines 604-5) Whereas, what we actually see is a character who is not part of community, on the contrary, prevents the Wedding guest to attend the social ceremony. As we listen to the Mariner telling his story, we witness as he undergoes a significant internal transformation rather than a clear-cut shift in external identity. His perspective changes from jovial sailor to burdened soul— after killing the Albatross,

he becomes ostracized and haunted by guilt. He showed the sin of arrogance and defiance towards nature and the divine by killing the Albatross. But after facing punishment and witnessing the death of his crew, he develops a deep respect for the natural order and a fear of God's power. Through his narrative we see him as an isolated wonderer unable to find solace due to his burden. However, through sharing his story and finding a sympathetic listener, he starts the path towards redemption. He doesn't assume a new social role, but his experiences fundamentally alter his perception of himself and the world. He becomes a marked man, forever haunted by the past but striving for forgiveness.

Byron and the Haunted Giaour

The Giaour is acknowledged as a Byronic poem notable for its romantic and tragic themes. It tells the story of a doomed love affair between a Christian man and a Muslim woman, set against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire. The poem is rich in themes of love, revenge, and the supernatural, with the Giaour seeking vengeance for Leila's death and ultimately facing a curse that turns him into a vampire-like figure, condemned to eternal suffering. While explaining the Giaour's transformation after the traumatic experience, Jerome McGann (*Fiery Dust*) refers to the "hereditary character" of the curse set on him and clarifies that it is congenital, and as such implies a physical indication of the curse, and thus he concurs that Byron wanted to depict the Giaour's transformation as actually a physical one, hence the "outward sign of the Giaour's own sickness" (1968, p. 160). The "sickness" of the Giaour he points to highlight his inability to escape the haunting memories of his past transgression.

Coleridge and Byron obscurely depict the theme of the power of speech, as a basic human potential to communicate, and the lack of it. The Mariner cannot stop telling the story once he feels the urge to start, whereas the Giaour's inability to speak is another post-traumatic effect prefigured in the fisherman's curse "Nor ear can hear, nor tongue can tell" (line 754). If this is literally read, the curse that induces his vampirism suspends some of his human capacities, such as the ability of expression, but also experiencing trauma can manifest itself in speech disorders or inability to speak. After joining the monastery, he is "Condemn'd to meditate and gaze" (line 993). APA lists avoidance symptoms found in people with a traumatic experience, such as avoiding people, places, and activities. It takes more than six years for the friar to hear his voice in his final speech, and he starts with the assertion of Leila's death, but then moves to his inability to utter the monstrous way of her death: "I dare not tell thee how" (line 1056). His speech oscillates between emotional revelations and silence: "I cannot prate in puling strain" (line 1103). The psychological pain he suffers cannot be explained in words; it can only be seen in his contorted lips: "Lips taught to writhe, but not complain" (line 1106). The Giaour explains: "T's true, I could not wine nor sigh" (line 1112). The traumatic experience of the Giaour has

robbed him of the ability of expression. The poem makes veiled connection between the Giaour's traumatic experience, as represented in the horror of Leila's death and the paradoxical nature of trauma with problems of memory and representation. That is why the Giaour recollects, "They told me 'twas a hideous tale! / I'd tell it but my tongue would fail" (lines 1308-9). The Giaour's reduced power of speech, as a living dead, is a confession of a traumatic experience and is similar to the Mariner's inability to speak in the encounter of the Life-in-Death figure. When the Giaour joins the monastery, it is in his eyes that the friars can read about his nature and his life. The reference to his dilated eye could as well be read as a dilated pupil of the eye, which happens in a state of shock or fear. When he meets the friars, his eyes have the effect of horror, which perplexes the observers: "As if that eye and bitter smile / Transferred to others fear and guile" (lines 848-9). The eyes of the Giaour bear more significance and add meaning to his suspended speech power. In Byron the eyes tell the trauma narrative.

The themes of memory and absence are closely intertwined, with memory serving as a constant reminder of what is absent—Leila, and absence fuelling the protagonist's grief and longing. Haunted by the past, the Giaour is tormented by the memories of his lost love, Leila. These memories are vivid and intrusive, causing him immense pain and preventing him from finding peace. The poem is filled with allusions to these memories, such as: "He dreamt of Leila's eye" (line 264); and "He saw again the dark-blue eye" (line 786). The Giaour's narration is filled with flashbacks and remembrances. He constantly relives the events that led to Leila's death, dwelling on every detail. The absence of Leila and everything she represented motivates the Giaour to recount his tale. He narrates his story as a way to keep her memory alive and to seek some kind of solace through the act of storytelling. People with PTSD are diagnosed with persistent feelings of fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame, listed under negative emotional state in DSM-5. The Giaour is consumed by anger towards Hassan, the man who caused him to lose Leila, mixed with guilt over his crimes, which is a constant torment, leading to self-loathing and a desire for punishment. He feels loss of interest in everyday activities in the monastery, never takes part in the sermons or talks to the friars. He is emotionally estranged from the life and people in the monastery even to the extent of emotional numbness. Trying to escape the tumult of the emotional conflict he seeks forgetfulness: "To rest, but not to feel 'tis rest." The Giaour's emotional state progresses to becoming self-destructive in a way that he closes himself completely from the world and awaits his own death, living a life of a vampire in which he is alive but already dead.

My memory now is but a tomb
Of joys now dead- my hope - their doom-
Though better to have died with those
Than bear a life of lingering woes- (lines 1000- 1003)

His melancholic yearning for death in which he will be joined with his beloved is a symptom of worsening of his emotional state. Melancholy is a term that has been used throughout history to describe a state of sadness or depression. In the case of the Giaour, the way he manages his trauma by silence, constant feeling of guilt, but no remorse for killing Hassan, keeps him in state which deteriorates his mental health and does not offer a way out, except for death.

Conclusion

Both *The Giaour* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* explore the powerful and complex role of memory in grappling with trauma and loss. The poems feature protagonists haunted by traumatic pasts: the Giaour is driven by vengeance for the loss of his beloved, while the Mariner is cursed to wander the earth retelling his story and reliving his trauma. In both cases, memory is a source of torment, forcing them to relive their painful experience.Their memory is fragmented and unreliable. Both poems depict memory as broken and unreliable. The Giaour's memories are filled with gaps and contradictions, reflecting the unreliability of his narrator. Similarly, the Mariner's story is distorted by trauma and hallucinations, making it difficult to discern truth from fiction. In these romantic texts memory serves as a tool for vengeance or redemption: In *The Giaour*, memory is used as a tool for vengeance, driving the protagonist's destructive actions. In contrast, memory in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* ultimately leads to redemption, as the Mariner confronts his guilt and seeks forgiveness, which ultimately leads to forgiveness and reconnecting with the natural world. While both *The Giaour* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* explore the painful and transformative power of memory, they do so in distinct ways. *The Giaour* focuses on the destructive potential of memory, while *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* offers a more hopeful vision of memory as a catalyst for healing and redemption. Ultimately, both poems remind us of the profound impact that memory has on our lives and the importance of confronting our past in order to move forward.

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