

Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

First published in 1798 in *Lyrical Ballads*, this poem was later revised in 1816 when the marginal glosses were added. In a Gothic narrative of bizarre events on a sea voyage almost to the other end of the world, Coleridge makes a powerfully dramatic statement of the essential unity of all things in Creation and of the power of the Creator both to punish and to forgive sin.

The Argument defines the physical and moral parameters of the narrative. It is the tale of a sea journey on which a great crime against Nature was committed by one man for which he was judged. Note:

- The emphasis given to the exotic setting into which the mariner ventures
- The consciousness of the great size of the Pacific Ocean – and of the smallness and vulnerability of the sailors.
- The mariner's story as an allegory of Original Sin
- The promise of "strange" adventures.

What is the poem about?

Some of the more interesting ideas explored by the poem include:

- Original Sin- the innate sinfulness of humanity
- The certainty of Divine punishment for wrong-doing
- The power- especially the atoning power- of Love
- The role of the Virgin Mary , the Queen of Heaven, in interceding with God on mankind's behalf
- The power of prayer
- Confession and repentance as a pathway to redemption
- The sacredness of Nature and all natural creatures
- The presence of the Divine in the universe
- The supernatural as a real force in the world
- The frivolities of youth in contrast to the wisdom of age
- The dual realities of good and evil in the universe
- The nightmare of suffering guaranteed to the guilty
- The power of the human imagination

How does the poem work?

Some of the more interesting techniques used by the poet include:

- The seven part structure
- The use of onomatopoeia to establish and to sustain atmosphere
- The effective variation of metre and rhythm to track the stages of the ship's voyage
- The powerful imagery
- The symbolic use of colour
- The powerful religious symbols
- The contribution to the poem's meaning made by the variation of stanza length from the standard four-line stanza

The poem in close-up

Part I

The narrative begins swiftly, and for the wedding guest specifically selected by the mariner to receive his message, ominously. The wedding guest's surprise is not unusual given the mariner's appearance: a strange mixture of physical decrepitude and hypnotic force.

The guest is breathless in his objection to the interference of his progress (note the breathed sounds of 'wherefore stopp'st thou') – he has, after all, a party to go to which holds all the promise of youth and hope rather than a tale of death which the old man's appearance foreshadows.

The wedding-guest is beckoned by the jollity of the proceedings revealed to him through the bridegroom's open doors; indeed it is his duty to attend as next of kin, yet the mariner physically restrains him. The mariner's duty to tell his story outweighs that of the wedding guest to speak at the wedding.

The mariner launches directly into his history – yet still the wedding guest is reluctant to listen. He interrupts the mariner's narrative with angry and abusive retort.

The interruption is, nevertheless, brief. The mariner's "glittering eye" is even more compelling than his "skinny hand". The loutish younger man is compelled to listen. (The simile in line 15 defines the kind of compulsion he feels.)

The wedding guest's resistance overcome, the mariner immediately begins his narrative.

Note:

- The realism of stanza 6
- The joy which accompanied the ship's departure (paralleled by the cheers at the wedding feast)
- The lightness of the rhythm which defines the atmosphere of the farewell
- The accuracy with which the images convey the ship's gradual loss of sight of land
- The suggestion in the repetition of "below" of the ship's descent into a darker plane of existence, into another world, (symbolically) below the kirk (the church) and away from the light of the lighthouse.

The wedding guest hears the loud bassoon – and wants to leave, but cannot. The instrument's hollow, echoing sound provides an appropriate overture to the supernatural world into which the mariner's narrative will transport them.

The bride makes her entrance - the gaiety in her step suggested by the lightness of the rhythm of stanza 9 and the quickened pace achieved by the short second and fourth lines of this stanza. This real world is so much less threatening than the world of the sea to which the mariner wants to transport his listener. However, the relative significance of the wedding reception is suggested by the cliché used to describe her flushed complexion.

The contrast between the bride's lightness of spirit and that of the remainder of her guests, and the angst now felt by the mariner's detainee is now even more marked – yet the latter remains transfixed by the old mana. Again, the supernatural force that holds him is defined by the repetition of the description of the mariner's advanced years and his “glittering eye”. The mariner has more than individual magnetism. He seems to have a mystical power.

Stanzas 11-15 recapture the intensity and sublimity of the mariner's experience as the ship sailed into the Southern Ocean towards the South Pole.

Consider:

- The effect of the capitalisation of “storm-blast”, which conjures up the traditional illustrations of the wind in ancient cartography. The personification of the storm-blast dramatises the power of the wind and gives it a symbolic significance as an expression of the Divine Being that informs the Universe. This symbolism is given greater resonance by the reference to wings which conjure up the image of the wings of an angel.
- The plenitude and completeness of Nature captured in the contrasting images of the soft mist and snow and the contrasting hard toughness of the ice. Note how the hardness of the ice as well as its colour is captured in the simile of the emerald. Note the surprising lightness of the enormous ice mass as it goes “floating by.”
- The danger attached to the wind's game: the ship tips perilously as it is driven at great speed by the roaring blast. Note the violence of the relationship between the ship and the elements captured in the extended simile of lines 45-50. Note also, the powerful enmity captured in the simplicity of “foe”, its effect intensified by its combination with “yell” and “blow.”
- The dramatic intensity given to the description of the ship's stormy progress by the six-line structural variation of stanza 13 in combination with the cumulative conjunctions of stanza 14. Consider the effect of “wondrous” in line 52.

This watery realm is curiously and marvellously animated yet devoid of living creatures apart from the ship's crew. It is also eerily lit by the “dismal sheen” (line 56) of the “snowy cliffs”. The sense of other-worldliness evoked here is highly significant as it establishes the atmosphere for the surreal events of the voyage yet to come.

The repetition and onomatopoeia (lines 61-62) of stanza 15 complete the description. The sounds delineate nature's terrifying power and its destructive capacity.

Into this surreal world of fear flies the albatross. It is a powerful symbol of the dove which came to alight on the hand of Noah as a harbinger of God's forgiveness and of the subsidence of the waters which threatened the very existence of all humankind. The Positive Divinity represented by the albatross is exemplified in the simile of lines 65-66.

The albatross establishes a companionable relationship with the mariners. It partakes in their food in a kind of shared communion. The favourable divine intervention it represents manifests itself in the splitting of the ice and the thoroughfare immediately provided to the ship through those elements which threaten to engulf it, and in the favourable south wind which “sprung up” to drive the ship onward to safety.

Undoubtedly, the albatross was a good omen. It participated in the spiritual as well as the daily life of the crew. It appeared unaffected and independent of the destructive elements with which it is surrounded. Yet, in the glimmering moon-shine there is a presentiment of evil.

Unaccountably – except as an expression of the flawed, sinful nature of humankind and as an individual expression of the evil presence suggested in the moon-shine – the mariner shoots the albatross.

Consider:

- The dramatic precursor to the confession of the crime provided by the wedding guest’s dramatic response and evocation of God’s blessing at the mariner’s troubled appearance
- The dramatic identification by the wedding guest of the presence of fiends in the universe, before the admission by the mariner to a fact which identifies him as a companion of dark forces.

Part II

The new day is announced matter-of-factly in stanza 21. Again the direction of the ship is defined by the sun” progress.

Stanza 22 suggests that the crew’s routine is not much affected by the bird’s death. Yet, the storyteller is aware that they will be punished for their indifference- this is foreshadowed by the ominous repeated reference to the bird’s previous friendly relationship with the crew.

Stanza 23 relates an ignominious set of facts –the crime is so great that its enunciation cannot be presented in the standard four-line stanza. The dreadful consequences of this crime against the bird and against Nature is reiterated in the next 10 stanzas.

Note:

- The ambiguity of the crew member’s response to the crime, captured in stanzas 23 and 24.
- The suggestion of divine awareness of the crime (and of the Divine Judgment to come) in the simile of line 97

- The ominous speed with which the ship is driven by both the wind and the sea to its destiny
- The heavy sounds and the slow rhythm of the monosyllables of stanza 26 which evoke the mental and physical fatigue of the becalmed crew

- The sun’s heat’s intensification of the crew’s predicament. Consider the symbolic suggestion of blood in its colour.
- The static quality of the image of the “painted ship” upon a “painted ocean”

- The use of repetition in stanza 28 to dramatise the deathly calm
- The repetition which defines the suffering of the crew surrounded by water in stanza 29, but having no water to slake their thirst

- The tactile and taste senses evoked in the previous stanza which are expanded in stanza 30 as the stench of the rotting deep invades the crewmen’s nostrils.
- The animated crawling of the “slimy things” that now slide over the surface of the ocean. The evocation of Christ emphasises their fiendish nature. They, themselves. Symbolise the presence of evil in the world.

- St Elmo’s fire heightens the sailors’ sense of dread. Even the water burns. The “death-fires” mock in their energetic animation, the sapped, lethargic state of the ship’s crew. The image is grotesquely Gothic.
- Individual crew members are plagued by nightmares of a daemonic spirit following the boat nine fathoms below. Each is rendered speechless by the withering of their tongues through thirst. Note the clogged sense and heavy swallowed sound of “soot”.

The mariner is damned by all aboard the ship – not by words, but by their looks. They voice their hatred for him by gesture rather than by words as they hang the dead bird’s corpse about his neck. This parody of the crucifix is a powerful symbol of the mariner’s brotherhood with the forces that destroy rather than sustain life. It is his badge of dishonour and of sin.

Part III

All would seem to be lost for the mariner and his fellow crew members as their thirst and the weariness of their existence is captured by the repetition of stanza 35. Yet, when all seems lost, is there a sign of hope? What is the meaning and the effect of the suspense created by the promise of lines 147-8? And of its elaboration in stanza 36?

The speck which has diverted the sailor's attention is defined in lines 145-155, 176-184 and 195.

Note:

- The promising energy of the spectral ship. Is its ability to ply its way on the still ocean sinister in itself?
- The suspense created by the indirect zig-zag path taken by the spectral ship
- The maintenance of a consciousness of the supernatural in the reference to a water-sprite and the echo in this second ship's progress of the journey of the mariner's ship as it is described in stanza 12
- The dramatically joyful response of the mariner to the appearance of the ship
- The sense of time passing
- The sinister symbolism of the ship's action. It is a visual statement of the imprisonment of the men by evil, in particular, of the gulf between the mariner and the sun (son) of God
- The reference to Mary, heaven's mother. The mariner is in need of her intercession on his behalf with Christ, the Redeemer.

The mariner's pain and disappointment is personalised by the increased sentiment of stanza 43. It is increased by his realisation that it is a ghost ship which approaches, and in stanza 44, that its crew is the spectre-woman and her death-mate. Shock turns to horror as the nightmarish death-in-life wins the lives – and the souls – of the mariner's fellow crewmembers. Yet at the end of part III, the mariner's own fate remains unresolved.

Consider:

- The ominous symbolism of the three whistles of death-in-life. They echo the three denials of Christ by St Peter
- The awful speed with which night falls and with which the spectre ship takes off into the darkness
- The suggestion of impending death in the thickness of the night and in the dimness of the starlight and of evil abroad in the star dogged moon.
- The magnified horror of the silent curse of 200 men, given just before their deaths
- The dramatic intensity given to each death by the onomatopoeic description of the sound made by each man as he falls lifeless to the deck and by the combination of visual and tactile imagery in the description of the lifeless form he became (line 218)
- The onomatopoeic lightness of "fly" and "fled" in stanza 51 and the intensification of the experience by the onomatopoeic impression of "whizz" of the simile by which the crime is linked to its consequence.

Part IV

Is it at all surprising that the wedding-guest interjects as he does in the mariner's narrative at this point? Is his outburst an expression of interest? Of horror? Of terror? Does it indicate an apprehensive belief in the wedding-guest's part that the mariner is a ghost? Is this why the mariner assures him of the physicality in stanza 53? Does the brief dialogue between the two act as a kind of dramatic to the intensity of the events just narrated?

The sounds of stanza 54 are as much a part of its meaning as the words used. The mariner speaks of his agony – an agony that continues to plague his present as it did the past events that followed the deaths of his companions at sea. The agony is as much at the loss of the beautiful men as at the enduring lives of the mariner and his new companions – the slimy things which numbered "a thousand thousand".

The mariner found himself surrounded by rotteness, deprived of the capacity to pray and therefore, also of the means of confessing his sins and finding redemption. The dust of the simile in line 247 is the symbol of his emotional and spiritual sterility.

The mariner can find no escape from his suffering. He cannot shut it out by closing his eyes, nor is it helped by the normal processes of decay. The sea might rot, but the corpses of his fellow crewmen do not. The accusing stares of the dead endure- and so does he. He cannot die.

The sea is transformed into a nightmare world of burning blood-red water and frost-like bedecking of the waves by a mocking, silent moon.

The moonlight, however, serves one positive purpose. In its light, the water snakes play and are dressed by the moon's "elfish light". Their colours are strongly tactile. Their tracks are golden fire. The mariner's heart responds intuitively to their beauty. He blesses them – the miracle of that moment is highlighted by its repetition. Immediately, the mariner is able to pray. As he does, the dead bird falls from his neck into the sea. The event is powerfully symbolic – the mariner has begun his journey to reconciliation with the Creator. The wheel of punishment has turned.

Part V

Nature responds to the mariner's call for mercy.

Consider:

- The renewed consciousness of heaven and of Mary, its queen, as she actively intercedes on the mariner's behalf
- The Biblical resonances of the gifts of dew and of rain
- The detailed description of the relief brought to the mariner's dry lips and parched throat
- The freeing of the mariner from bodily pain
- The active intercession of heaven in the coming of the wind and in the play of light in the sky
- The sense of joy evoked by the description of the dancing stars (line 317)
- The importance of conjunction (the repeated use of "and") in the delineation of the mariner's joy and in the awakening of the sea world
- The ghostly, eerie atmosphere created by the description and personification of the sails – and their physical reminder of the ship which carried the spectre woman and her companion, Life-in-Death
- The importance of the sedge simile (line 319) which introduces an element of pathos in its promise of another landfall for the mariner and his death ship
- The biblical resonance of the one single black cloud which brought the rain even as it was cleft in two. It is the physical evidence of the hand of God in the poem's events.
- The significance of the simile which describes the river of lightning
- The supernatural forces which drive the ship: dead men (including the mariner's nephew) animated by blessed spirits; the sails driven but untouched by wind; the hymns sung at the mast at dawn and caught up and intermingled as they dart to the sun (a parody of the albatross' earlier flight).
- The beauty of the celestial music of the sky-lark and smaller birds and the expansion of their significance by the similes used to describe them. Note the powerful consciousness of heaven and of heaven's blessing in the extended musical imagery.

This time the silence of the creatures in the seascape has its own beauty. The sails echo the the sounds of a leaf-covered brook in June as it sings "a quiet tune" to the "sleeping woods". Serenity is all. It marks the ship's progress captured in the quiet gentleness of the metre, the alliteration and the assonance of stanza 85.

The mariner's attention turns from the heavens and the immediate surface surrounds of the ship to the deep below. This realm is now the province of a friendly spirit which drives the ship forward until noon, when it was, again, still. The sun now appears at its zenith. This time it is a symbol of benign and not malevolent forces. Its reappearance symbolises the mariner's reconnection with Life and with God. The simile which compares the sun with a "pawing horse" reminds us of the extraordinary power of Nature and of God over man.

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