

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge

was born on October 21, 1772 in Devon, England. A friend to poet William Wordsworth, Coleridge was a founder of the English Romantic Movement. His best known poems are "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan," the latter of which was reportedly written under the influence of opium

### *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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### *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

(originally *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*) is the longest major poem by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, written in 1797–98 and published in 1798 in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Some modern editions use a revised version printed in 1817 that featured a gloss. Along with other poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, it is often considered a signal shift to modern poetry and the beginning of British Romantic literature.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* relates the experiences of a sailor who has returned from a long sea voyage. The mariner stops a man who is on his way to a wedding ceremony and begins to narrate a story. The wedding-guest's reaction turns from bemusement to impatience to fear to fascination as the

mariner's story progresses, as can be seen in the language style: Coleridge uses narrative techniques such as personification and repetition to create a sense of danger, the supernatural, or serenity, depending on the mood in different parts of the poem.

### Early criticisms

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Upon its release, the poem was criticized for being obscure and difficult to read. The use of archaic spelling of words was seen as not in keeping with Wordsworth's claims of using common language. Criticism was renewed again in 1815–16, when Coleridge added marginal notes to the poem that were also written in an archaic style. These notes or [glosses](#), placed next to the text of the poem, ostensibly interpret the verses much like marginal notes found in the Bible. There were many opinions on why Coleridge inserted the gloss. [Charles Lamb](#), who had deeply admired the original for its attention to "Human Feeling", claimed that the gloss distanced the audience from the narrative, weakening the poem's effects. The entire poem was first published in the collection of *Lyrical Ballads*. Another version of the poem was published in the 1817 collection entitled *Sibylline Leaves* (see [1817 in poetry](#)).

### Interpretations

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On a surface level the poem explores a violation of nature and the resulting psychological effects on the mariner and on all those who hear him. According to [Jerome McGann](#) the poem is like a salvation story. The poem's structure is multi-layered text based on Coleridge's interest in [higher criticism](#). "Like the Iliad or Paradise Lost or any great historical product, the *Rime* is a work of transhistorical rather than so-called universal significance. This verbal distinction is important because it calls attention to a real one. Like The Divine Comedy or any other

poem, the *Rime* is not valued or used always or everywhere or by everyone in the same way or for the same reasons."

George Whalley, in his 1946-47 essay, "The Mariner and the Albatross", suggests that the Ancient Mariner is an autobiographical portrait of Coleridge himself, comparing the mariner's loneliness with Coleridge's own feelings of loneliness expressed in his letters and journals.

## Summary

An Ancient Mariner, unnaturally old and skinny, with deeply-tanned skin and a "glittering eye", stops a Wedding Guest who is on his way to a wedding reception with two companions. He tries to resist the Ancient Mariner, who compels him to sit and listen to his woeful tale. The Ancient Mariner tells his tale, largely interrupted save for the sounds from the wedding reception and the Wedding Guest's fearsome interjections. One day when he was younger, the Ancient Mariner set sail with two hundred other sailors from his native land. The day was sunny and clear, and all were in good cheer until the ship reached the equator. Suddenly, a terrible storm hit and drove the ship southwards into a "rime" - a strange, icy patch of ocean. The towering, echoing "rime" was bewildering and impenetrable, and also desolate until an Albatross appeared out of the mist. No sooner than the sailors fed it did the ice break and they were able to steer through. As long as the Albatross flew alongside the ship and the sailors treated it kindly, a good wind carried them and a mist followed. One day, however, the Ancient Mariner shot and killed the Albatross on impulse.

Suddenly the wind and mist ceased, and the ship was stagnant on the ocean. The other sailors alternately blamed the Ancient Mariner for making the wind die and praised him for making the strange mist disappear. Then things began to go awry. The sun became blindingly hot, and there was no drinkable water amidst the salty ocean, which tossed with terrifying creatures. The sailors went dumb from their thirst and sunburned lips. They hung the Albatross around the Ancient Mariner's neck as a

symbol of his sin. After a painful while, a ship appeared on the horizon, and the Ancient Mariner bit his arm and sucked the blood so he could cry out to the other sailors. The ship was strange: it sailed without wind, and when it crossed in front of the sun, its stark masts seemed to imprison the sun. When the ship neared, the Ancient Mariner could see that it was a ghost ship manned by Death, in the form of a man, and Life-in-Death, in the form of a beautiful, naked woman. They were gambling for the Ancient Mariner's soul. Life-in-Death won the Ancient Mariner's soul, and the other sailors were left to Death. The sky went black immediately as the ghost ship sped away. Suddenly all of the sailors cursed the Ancient Mariner with their eyes and dropped dead on the deck. Their souls zoomed out of their bodies, each taunting the Ancient Mariner with a sound like that of his crossbow. Their corpses miraculously refused to rot; they stared at him unrelentingly, cursing him with their eyes.

The Ancient Mariner drifted on the ocean in this company, unable to pray. One night he noticed some beautiful water-snakes frolicking at the ship's prow in the icy moonlight. Watching the creatures brought him unprecedented joy, and he blessed them without meaning to. When he was finally able to pray, the Albatross fell from his neck and sank into the sea. He could finally sleep, and dreamed of water. When he awoke, it was raining, and an awesome thunderstorm began. He drank his fill, and the ship began to sail in lieu of wind. Then the dead sailors suddenly arose and sailed the ship without speaking. They sang heavenly music, which the ship's sails continued when they had stopped. Once the ship reached the equator again, the ship jolted, causing the Ancient Mariner to fall unconscious. In his swoon, he heard two voices discussing his fate. They said he would continue to be punished for killing the Albatross, who was loved by a spirit. Then they disappeared. When the Ancient Mariner awoke, the dead sailors were grouped together, all cursing him with their eyes once again. Suddenly, however, they disappeared as well. The Ancient Mariner was not relieved, because he realized that he was doomed to be haunted by them forever.

The wind picked up, and the Ancient Mariner spotted his native country's shore. Then bright angels appeared standing over every corpse and waved silently to the shore, serving as beacons to guide the ship home. The Ancient Mariner was overjoyed to see a Pilot, his boy, and a Hermit rowing a small boat out to the ship. He planned to ask the Hermit to absolve him of his sin. Just as the rescuers reached the ship, it sank suddenly and created a vortex in the water. The rescuers were able to pull the Ancient Mariner from the water, but thought he was dead. When he abruptly came to and began to row the boat, the Pilot and Pilot's Boy lost their minds. The spooked Hermit asked the Ancient Mariner what kind of man he was. It was then that the Ancient Mariner learned of his curse; he would be destined to tell his tale to others from beginning to end when an agonizing, physical urge struck him. After he related his tale to the Hermit, he felt normal again.

The Ancient Mariner tells the Wedding Guest that he wanders from country to country, and has a special instinct that tells him to whom he must tell his story. After he tells it, he is temporarily relieved of his agony. The Ancient Mariner tells the Wedding Guest that better than any merriment is the company of others in prayer. He says that the best way to become close with God is to respect all of His creatures, because He loves them all. Then he vanishes. Instead of joining the wedding reception, the Wedding Guest walks home, stunned. We are told that he awakes the next day "sadder and...wiser" for having heard the Ancient Mariner's tale.

### Stanza/Explanation

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrow followed free;  
We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

A favourable gentle wind blew. The white foam flew off the surface of the ocean. The ship sailed onward calmly and the track made by it was clearly visible. It seemed to them that they

were the first people who had ever come to that silent sea. There is a use of alliteration in the first two lines of this stanza. There is a repetition of 'F' and 'b' sounds which creates a musical effect besides conveying the idea of the smooth and swift gliding movement of the ship whereas the use of the word 'furrow' illustrate metaphor in this stanza. And the word furrow refers to the splitting of water caused behind a ship due to its forward movement. The line 'The furrow followed free' suggests that the ship sailed on smoothly.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,

'Twas sad as sad could be;

And we did speak only to break

The silence of the sea!

The wind stopped blowing. The sails too dropped. There was complete silence all around. It was a very sad situation. The eerie silence of the sea was broken only by the sailors' talk. The 'breeze' had stopped blowing because the Albatross's wrongful killing had begun to show its effects. The ancient Mariner and his fellow sailors are about to be punished for the 'sin'.

It is to be noted that lines in this para create an atmosphere of eerie silence and absolute inactivity. The atmosphere leaves the sailors full of suspense, fear and uncertainty.

All in a hot and copper sky,

The bloody Sun, at noon,

Right up above the mast did stand,

No bigger than the Moon.

The sky looked like heated copper. The sun looked blood red. Even at noon, it stood vertically above the mast and looked as small as the moon. Again there is a use of metaphor in this stanza when the poet says: 'a hot and copper sky' and 'The bloody Sun'. The sun is blazing red and scorching hot. It is also

‘blood’ red in colour, hence it has been called ‘bloody sun’. To the sailors, the harsh weather signifies that they have to face and suffer under this type of weather due to the ‘sin’ of killing of Albatross. It is a part of the punishment they being subjected to. These lines also tell about the location of the ship. The ship is on or near the equator because the sun is very harsh and is at a vertical angle at noon – a phenomenon that occurs in the equatorial region only.

Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.

The ship remained stuck at one place day after day. It did not move because there was neither wind nor tide. It looked just like the picture of a ship on the sea. The ancient Mariner and his fellow sailors on board their ship were stuck in the middle of the silent sea. And they were brought into this condition because the mariners had drifted into the silent sea where there was neither wind nor tide, hence they were stranded there. There is a use of simile in the last two lines of this stanza. It graphically describes the pictures of a becalmed ship on a silent and still ocean. Hence, it is very apt, and the repetition conveys the sheer length of time the sailors’ ship was stuck up in the middle of the ocean.

Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.

The Mariner says that though the ship was surrounded by water all sides yet the very boarder of the ship began to crack and shrink because of the excessive heat. They were in the midst of so much water, but there wasn’t even a drop they could drink. These lines have the repetition of ‘w’ sound, while the repetition



of the line: 'Water, water, everywhere,' signifies the peculiar fate the sailors had to face. Although they were surrounded by immeasurable amount of sea water, they had not a drop of water to wet their parched mouths. The repetition gauges the extent of their misery. And the sailors have 'not a drop' to drink because their supply of fresh water was exhausted and they simply could not drink the salty sea water.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!

That ever this should be!

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs

Upon the slimy sea.

The sea itself began to rot due to no movement in the wind or the water. Very repulsive sea-creatures could be seen crawling with their ugly legs on the sticky and slimy glue-like water of the sea. It was a horrible sight to see. They remarked that Lord Christ should save everyone from such a frightening situation.

**Read more: [The Pains of Sleep by Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#)**

'The very deep' here refers to the sea which was stagnant, war and full of stench. In these lines, the ancient Mariner invokes Christ because the invocation conveys the ancient Mariner's deep sense of agony and repentance at having killed the Albatross. Now only Christ can save his rotting and sinful soul. There is an element of irony in this invocation while the ancient Mariner seeks Christ's help to save his soul after committing the sin of killing a Christian soul, i.e. the Albatross.

About, about, in reel and rout

The death-fires danced at night;

The water, like a witch's oils,

Burnt green, and blue and white.



Death-fires shone and hovered all about them at night. Their luminous lights appeared to be dancing and wheeling around the ship. The sea-water burnt like the oils burnt by the witches emitting multi-coloured lights. This stanza has simile in the last two lines. The reference here is to the three witches in Shakespeare's play 'Macbeth'. The water seems to be burning with crackling sparkles of many colours. The element of supernaturalism here prepares us for what is to follow. The 'reel' and 'rout' though actually is a type of dance movements, here they describe the movement of the death-fires as they fly, while the 'death-fires' represent evil forces or Death.

And some in dreams assurèd were

Of the Spirit that plagued us so;

Nine fathom deep he had followed us

From the land of mist and snow.

Some of the sailors had a dream that a spirit was avenging the death of the Albatross and had been following their ship from the land of mist and snow. It had been moving all the while nine fathom deep in the water. It is to be noted that 'some' has been used for the fellow sailors of the Ancient Mariner in the very first line of this stanza, while 'Nine fathom deep', means a fathom that is a measure of depth equal to six meters. Thus, the Polar spirit was following the sailors fifty four meters under water. Please note that Coleridge's obsession with the number 9 is again evident here as it was in case of 'vespers nine' previously in the poem.

And every tongue, through utter drought,

Was withered at the root;

We could not speak, no more than if

We had been choked with soot.

For utter want to water, the sailors' tongues dried up at the very root. They just could not speak. They felt as if their throats had been choked with soot (solidified smoke). There is a use of

metaphor in these lines. The comparison is between the dry and dehydrated tongues and the roots of a plant which have withered due to lack of water.

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks

Had I from old and young!

Instead of the cross, the Albatross

About my neck was hung.

The sailors looked at the Mariner accusingly. They could not speak but their looks revealed the contempt they felt for him. They removed the cross from round his neck and hung the dead Albatross there as a punishment for his evil deed.

The poet or Mariner here says: 'instead of three cross' the Albatross was hung around his neck because many Christians wear a cross round their necks as a protection against evil forces. The sinful soul of the ancient Mariner needed a cross to save itself. The sailors instead hung the dead Albatross round his neck as a mark of his sin and guilt.

This stanza again shows the changed attitude of sailors towards the death of Albatross. First they condemned it by saying that the Albatross was a bird of good omen. It had made the breeze to blow. Later on they approve of its killing, and held it responsible for the fog and the mist. Then once again they accused the Mariner for making their lives miserable by killing the Albatross.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a particular long poem, split into seven parts. Please feel free to view any of the other parts that have been analysed on PoemAnalysis.com:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dharmender is a writer by passion, and a lawyer by profession. He has has a degree in English literature from Delhi University, and Mass Communication from Bhartiya Vidhya Bhavan, Delhi. Besides this, he also holds law degree. Dharmender is awesomely passionate about Indian and English literature, and continuously read poems of many different poets.

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6. Sam March 9, 2018

Thanks....was very helpful..

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- Lee-James Bovey March 12, 2018

No problem at all. Glad it helped!

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7. Madhur March 11, 2018

Really well analyses. I will appreciate the analyst for such a critical and careful consideration of this poem. A big thanks to him

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- Lee-James Bovey March 12, 2018

Thank you for your feedback. I'm glad you are enjoying the site.

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8. DawneChanelle September 10, 2018

It seems the mariner is referring to \*The Aurora australis, commonly referred to as the southern lights\* in this verse of the poem below:

“About,            about,            in            reel            and            rout  
The            death-fires            danced            at            night;

The water, like a witch's oils,  
Burnt green, and blue and white.”

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- Lee-James Bovey September 11, 2018  
ohhh...nice spot. I think you are onto something there!

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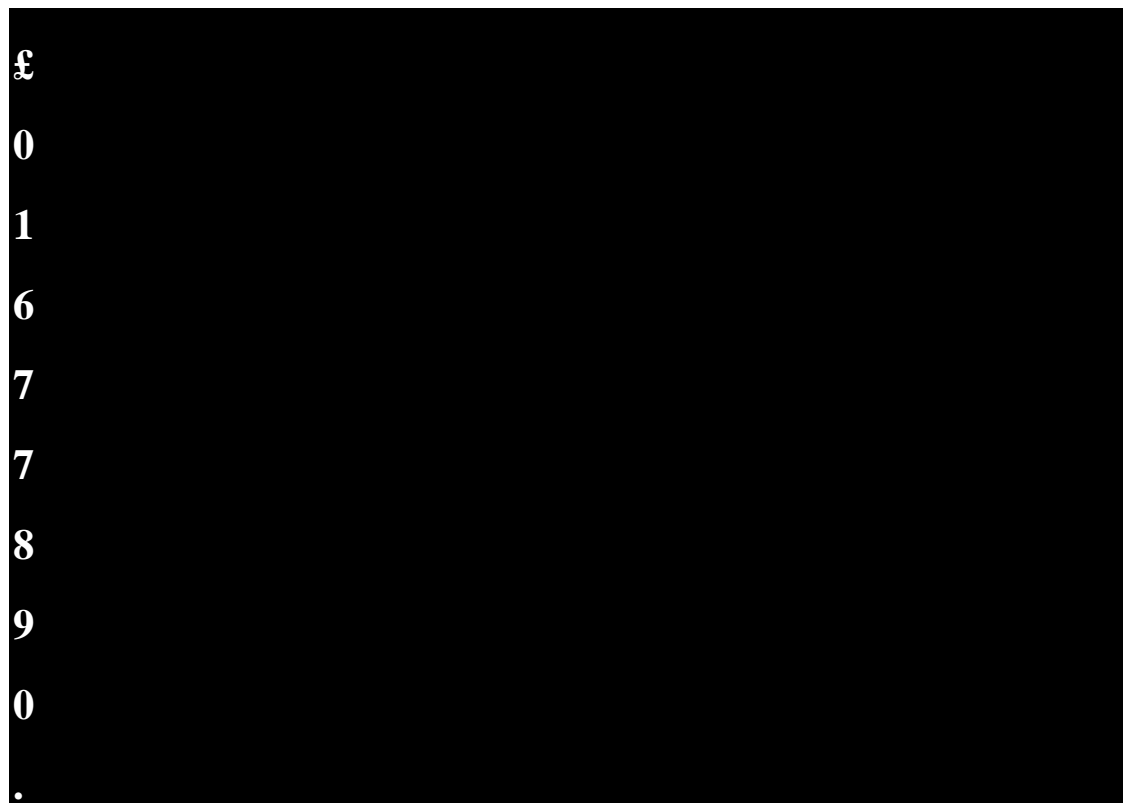
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## **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Themes**

### **1-The Natural World: The Physical**

While it can be beautiful and frightening (often simultaneously), the natural world's power in "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)" is unquestionable. In a move typical of Romantic poets both preceding and following Coleridge, and especially typical of his colleague, William Wordsworth, Coleridge emphasizes the way in which the natural world dwarfs and asserts its awesome power over man. Especially in the 1817 text, in which Coleridge includes marginal glosses, it is clear that the spiritual world controls and utilizes the natural world. At times the natural world seems to be a character itself,



based on the way it interacts with the Ancient Mariner. From the moment the Ancient Mariner offends the spirit of the "rime," retribution comes in the form of natural phenomena. The wind dies, the sun intensifies, and it will not rain. The ocean becomes revolting, "rotting" and thrashing with "slimy" creatures and sizzling with strange fires. Only when the Ancient Mariner expresses love for the natural world-the water-snakes-does his punishment abate even slightly. It rains, but the storm is unusually awesome, with a thick stream of fire pouring from one huge cloud. A spirit, whether God or a pagan one, dominates the physical world in order to punish and inspire reverence in the Ancient Mariner. At the poem's end, the Ancient Mariner preaches respect for the natural world as a way to remain in good standing with the spiritual world, because in order to respect God, one must respect all of his creations. This is why he valorizes the Hermit, who sets the example of both prayer and living in harmony with nature. In his final advice to the Wedding Guest, the Ancient Mariner affirms that one can access the sublime, "the image of a greater and better world," only by seeing the value of the mundane, "the petty things of daily life."

## **2-The Spiritual World: The Metaphysical**

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" occurs in the natural, physical world-the land and ocean. However, the work has popularly been interpreted as an allegory of man's connection to the spiritual, metaphysical world. In the epigraph, Burnet speaks of man's urge to "classify" things since Adam named the animals. The Ancient Mariner shoots the Albatross as if to prove that it is not an airy spirit, but rather a mortal creature; in a symbolic way, he tries to "classify" the Albatross. Like all natural things, the Albatross is intimately tied to the spiritual world, and thus begins the Ancient Mariner's punishment by the spiritual world by means of the natural world. Rather than address him directly; the supernatural communicates through the natural. The ocean, sun, and lack of wind and rain punish the

Ancient Mariner and his shipmates. When the dead men come alive to curse the Ancient Mariner with their eyes, things that are natural-their corpses-are inhabited by a powerful spirit. Men (like Adam) feel the urge to define things, and the Ancient Mariner seems to feel this urge when he suddenly and inexplicably kills the Albatross, shooting it from the sky as though he needs to bring it into the physical, definable realm. It is mortal, but closely tied to the metaphysical, spiritual world-it even flies like a spirit because it is a bird.

The Ancient Mariner detects spirits in their pure form several times in the poem. Even then, they talk only *about* him, and not *to* him. When the ghost ship carrying Death and Life-in-Death sails by, the Ancient Mariner overhears them gambling. Then when he lies unconscious on the deck, he hears the First Voice and Second Voice discussing his fate. When angels appear over the sailors' corpses near the shore, they do not talk to the Ancient Mariner, but only guide his ship. In all these instances, it is unclear whether the spirits are real or figments of his imagination. The Ancient Mariner-and we the reader-being mortal beings, require physical affirmation of the spiritual. Coleridge's spiritual world in the poem balances between the religious and the purely fantastical. The Ancient Mariner's prayers do have an effect, as when he blesses the water-snakes and is relieved of his thirst. At the poem's end, he valorizes the holy Hermit and the act of praying with others. However, the spirit that follows the sailors from the "rime", Death, Life-in-Death, the voices, and the angels, are not necessarily Christian archetypes. In a move typical of both Romantic writers and painters, Coleridge locates the spiritual and/or holy in the natural world in order to emphasize man's connection to it. Society can distance man from the sublime by championing worldly pleasures and abandoning reverence for the otherworld. In this way, the wedding reception represents man's alienation from the holy - even in a religious tradition like marriage. However, society can also bring man closer to the sublime, such as when people gather together in prayer.

### 3-Liminality

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" typifies the Romantic fascination with liminal spaces. A liminal space is defined as a place on the edge of a realm or between two realms, whether a forest and a field, or reason and imagination. A liminal space often signifies a liminal state of mind, such as the threshold of the imagination's wonders. Romantics such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats valorize the liminal space and state as places where one can experience the sublime. For this reason they are often - and especially in the case of Coleridge's poems - associated with drug-induced euphoria. Following from this, liminal spaces and states are those in which pain and pleasure are inextricable. Romantic poets frequently had their protagonists enter liminal spaces and become irreversibly changed. Starting in the epigraph to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Coleridge expresses a fascination with the liminal state between the spiritual and natural, or the mundane and the divine. Recall that this is what Burnet calls the "certain [and] uncertain" and "day [and] night."

In the Ancient Mariner's story, liminal spaces are bewildering and cause pain. The first liminal space the sailors encounter is the equator, which is in a sense about as liminal a location as exists; after all, it is the threshold between the Earth's hemispheres. No sooner has the ship crossed the equator than a terrible storm ensues and drives it into the poem's ultimate symbolic liminal space, the icy world of the "rime." It is liminal by its very physical makeup; there, water exists not in one a single, definitive state, but in all three forms: liquid (water), solid (ice), and gas (mist). They are still most definitely in the ocean, but surrounding them are mountainous icebergs reminiscent of the land. The "rime" fits the archetype of the Romantic liminal space in that it is simultaneously terrifying and beautiful, and in that the sailors do not navigate there purposely, but are rather transported there by some other force. Whereas the open ocean is a wild territory representing the mysteries of the mind and the sublime, the "rime" exists just on

its edge. As a liminal space it holds great power, and indeed a powerful spirit inhabits the "rime."

As punishment for his crime of killing the Albatross, the Ancient Mariner is sentenced to Life-in-Death, condemned to be trapped in a limbo-like state where his "glittering eye" tells of both powerful genius and pain. He can compel others to listen to his story from beginning to end, but is forced to do so to relieve his pain. The Ancient Mariner is caught in a liminal state that, as in much of Romantic poetry, is comparable to addiction. He can relieve his suffering temporarily by sharing his story, but must do so continually. The Ancient Mariner suffers because of his experience in the "rime" and afterwards, but has also been extremely close to the divine and sublime because of it. Therefore his curse is somewhat of a blessing; great and unusual knowledge accompanies his pain. The Wedding Guest, the Hermit, and all others to whom he relates his tale enter into a momentary liminal state themselves where they have a distinct sensation of being stunned or mesmerized.

#### **4-Religion**

Although Christian and pagan themes are confounded at times in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", many readers and critics have insisted on a Christian interpretation. Coleridge claimed that he did not intend for the poem to have a moral, but it is difficult not to find one in Part 7. The Ancient Mariner essentially preaches closeness to God through prayer and the willingness to show respect to all of God's creatures. He also says that he finds no greater joy than in joining others in prayer: "To walk together to the kirk, / And all together pray, / While each to his great Father bends, / Old men, and babes, and loving friends, / And youths and maidens gay!" He also champions the Hermit, who does nothing but pray, practice humility before God, and openly revere God's creatures. The Ancient Mariner's shooting of the Albatross can be compared to several Judeo-Christian stories of betrayal, including the original sin of Adam and Eve, and Cain's betrayal of Abel.

Like Adam and Eve, the Ancient Mariner fails to respect God's rules and is tempted to try to understand things that should remain out of his reach. Like them, he is forbidden from being truly close to the sublime, existing in a limbo-like rather than an Eden-like state. However, as a son of Adam and Eve, the Ancient Mariner is already a sinner and cast out of the divine realm. Like Cain, the Ancient Mariner angers God by killing another creature. Most obviously, the Ancient Mariner can be seen as the archetypal Judas or the universal sinner who betrays Christ by sinning. Like Judas, he murders the "Christian soul" who could lead to his salvation and greater understanding of the divine. Many readers have interpreted the Albatross as Christ, since it is the "rime" spirit's favorite creature, and the Ancient Mariner pays dearly for killing it. The Albatross is even hung around the Ancient Mariner's neck to mark him for his sin. Though the rain baptizes him after he is finally able to pray, like a real baptism, it does not ensure his salvation. In the end, the Ancient Mariner is like a strange prophet, kept alive to pass word of God's greatness onto others.

## **5-Imprisonment**

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is in many ways a portrait of imprisonment and its inherent loneliness and torment. The first instance of imprisonment occurs when the sailors are swept by a storm into the "rime." The ice is "mast-high", and the captain cannot steer the ship through it. The sailors' confinement in the disorienting "rime" foreshadows the Ancient Mariner's later imprisonment within a bewildered limbo-like existence. In the beginning of the poem, the ship is a vehicle of adventure, and the sailors set out in one another's happy company. However, once the Ancient Mariner shoots the Albatross, it quickly becomes a prison. Without wind to sail the ship, the sailors lose all control over their fate. They are cut off from civilization, even though they have each other's company. They are imprisoned further by thirst, which silences them and effectively puts them in isolation; they are denied the basic

human ability to communicate. When the other sailors drop dead, the ship becomes a private prison for the Ancient Mariner.

Even more dramatically, the ghost ship seems to imprison the sun: "And straight the sun was flecked with bars, / (Heaven's Mother send us grace!) / As if through a dungeon-grate he peered / With broad and burning face." The ghost ship has such power that it can imprison even the epitome of the natural world's power, the sun. These lines symbolize the spiritual world's power over the natural and physical; spirits can control not only mortals, but the very planets themselves. After he is rescued from the prison that is the ship, the Ancient Mariner is subject to the indefinite imprisonment of his soul within his physical body. His "glittering" eye represents his frenzied soul, eager to escape from his ravaged body. He is imprisoned by the addiction to his own story, as though trapped in the "rime" forever. In a sense, the Ancient Mariner imprisons others by compelling them to listen to his story; they are physically compelled to join him in his torment until he releases them.

## **6-Retribution**

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a tale of retribution, since the Ancient Mariner spends most of the poem paying for his one, impulsive error of killing the Albatross. The spiritual world avenges the Albatross's death by wreaking physical and psychological havoc on the Ancient Mariner and his shipmates. Even before the sailors die, their punishment is extensive; they become delirious from a debilitating state of thirst, their lips bake black in the sun, and they must endure the torment of seeing water all around them while being unable to drink it for its saltiness. Eventually the sailors all die, their souls flying either to heaven or hell. There are at least two ways to interpret the fact that the sailors suffer with the Ancient Mariner although they themselves have not erred. The first is that retribution is blind; inspired by anger and the desire to punish others, even a spirit may hurt the wrong people. The second is that the sailors are implicated in the Ancient Mariner's crime. If the Ancient



Mariner represents the universal sinner, then each sailor, as a human, is guilty of having at some point disrespected one of God's creatures-or if not, he would have in the future. But the eternal punishment called Life-in-Death is reserved for the Ancient Mariner. Presumably the spirit, being immortal, must endure eternal grief over the murder of its beloved Albatross. In retribution, it forces the Ancient Mariner to endure eternal torment as well, in the form of his curse. Though he never dies - and may never, in a sense - the Ancient Mariner speaks from beyond the grave to warn others about the harsh, permanent consequences of momentary foolishness, selfishness, and disrespect of the natural world.

## **7-The Act of Storytelling**

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge draws our attention not only to the Ancient Mariner's story, but to the act of storytelling itself. The Ancient Mariner's tale comprises so much of the poem that moments that occur outside of it often seem like interruptions. We are not only Coleridge's audience, but the Ancient Mariner's. Therefore, the messages that the protagonist delivers to his audience apply to us, as well. Storytelling is a preventative measure in the poem, used to dissuade those who favor the pleasures of society (like the Wedding Guest and, presumably, ourselves) from disregarding the natural and spiritual worlds. The poem can also be seen as an allegory for the writer's task. Coleridge uses the word "teach" to describe the Ancient Mariner's storytelling, and says that he has "strange power of speech." In this way, he compares the protagonist to himself: both are gifted storytellers who impart their wisdom unto others. By associating himself with the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge implies that he, and by extension all writers, are not only inspired but *compelled* to write. Their gift is equally a curse; the pleasure of writing is marred with torment. According to this interpretation, the writer writes not to please himself or others, but to sate a painful urge. Inherent in the writer's task is communication with others, whom he must



warn lest they suffer a similar fate. Just as the Ancient Mariner is forced to balance in a painful limbo between life and death, the writer is compelled and even condemned to balance in the liminal space of the imagination "until [his] tale is told." Like a writer, he is equally enthralled and pained by his imagination. Both are addicts, and storytelling is their drug; it provides only momentary relief until the urge to tell returns. In modern psychological terms, the Ancient Mariner as well as the writer relies on "the talking cure" to relieve himself of his psychological burden. But for the Ancient Mariner, the cure - reliving the experience that started with the "rime" by repeating his "rhyme" - is part of the torture. Coleridge paints an equally powerful and pathetic image of the writer. The Ancient Mariner is able to inspire the Wedding Guest so that he awakes the next day a new man, yet he is also the constant victim of his own talent - a curse that torments, but never destroys.