

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

***It is from Coleridge's magnum opus that the old maxim
"water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink"
originates.***

Plot summary

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 the way to a wedding ceremony and begins to narrate a story. The Wedding-Guest's reaction turns from bemusement to impatience and fear to fascination as the Mariner's story progresses, as can be seen in the language style: for example, Coleridge uses narrative techniques such as personification and repetition to create either a sense of danger, of the supernatural or of serenity, depending on the mood of each of the different parts of the poem.

The Mariner's tale begins with his ship departing on its journey. Despite initial good fortune, the ship is driven south off course by a storm and eventually reaches Antarctica. An albatross appears and leads them out of the Antarctic but, even as the albatross is praised by the ship's crew, the Mariner shoots the bird ("with my cross-bow / I shot the albatross"). The crew is angry with the Mariner, believing the albatross brought the south wind that led them out of the Antarctic. However, the sailors change their minds when the weather becomes warmer and the mist disappears ("Twas right, said they, such birds to slay / that bring the fog and mist"). However, they made a grave mistake in supporting this crime as it arouses the wrath of spirits who then pursue the ship "from the land of mist and snow"; the south wind that had initially led them from the land of ice now sends the ship into uncharted waters, where it is becalmed.

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

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

Here, however, the sailors change their minds again and blame the Mariner for the torment of their thirst. In anger, the crew forces the Mariner to wear the dead albatross about his neck, perhaps to illustrate the burden he must suffer from killing it, or perhaps as a sign of regret ("Ah! Well a-day! What evil looks / Had I from old and young! / Instead of the cross, the albatross / About my neck was hung"). Eventually, in an eerie passage, the ship encounters a ghostly vessel. On board are Death (a skeleton) and the "Night-mare Life-in-Death" (a deathly-pale woman), who are playing dice for the souls of the crew. With a roll of the dice, Death wins the lives of the crew members and Life-in-Death the life of the Mariner, a prize she considers more valuable. Her name is a clue as to the Mariner's fate; he will endure a fate worse than death as punishment for his killing of the albatross.

***Ah ! well a-day ! what evil looks
Had I from old and young !
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.***

An albatross around one's neck

Meaning: A burden which some unfortunate person has to carry.

Origin

This phrase refers to lines from the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in which the eponymous mariner, who shoots an albatross, is obliged to carry the burden of the bird hung around his neck, as a punishment for and reminder of his ill deed. *The word 'albatross' is sometimes used metaphorically to mean a psychological burden that feels like a curse. It is an allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798).*

In the poem, an albatross starts to follow a ship — being followed by an albatross was generally considered an omen of good luck. However, the titular mariner shoots the albatross with a crossbow, which is regarded as an act that will curse the ship (which indeed suffers terrible mishaps). To punish him, his companions induce him to wear the dead albatross around his neck indefinitely (until they all die from the curse, as it happens). Thus the albatross can be both an omen of good or bad luck, as well as a metaphor for a burden to be carried (as penance).

The symbolism used in the Coleridge poem is its highlight. For example:

***Ah ! well a-day ! what evil looks
Had I from old and young !
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.***

Part I

Key points:

1. The Mariner stops a wedding guest and forces him, spellbound, to listen to his story.
2. The ship sails south to equator.
3. Wedding guest hears music of wedding beginning.
4. A storm hits the ship and impels it south. They are stuck in ice.
5. An albatross appears and is befriended by the shipmates. A south wind springs up and takes them northward.
6. The Mariner kills it with his crossbow.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Summary - Part 1

In the poem's first line, we meet its protagonist, "an ancient Mariner." He stops one of three people on their way to a wedding celebration. The leader of the group, the Wedding Guest, tries to resist being stopped by the strange old man with the "long grey beard and glittering eye." He explains that he is on his way to enjoy the wedding merriment; he is the closest living relative to the groom, and the festivities have already begun. Still, the Ancient Mariner takes his hand and begins his story. The Wedding Guest has no choice but to sit down on a rock to listen.

The Ancient Mariner explains that one clear and bright day, he set out sail on a ship full of happy seamen. They sailed along smoothly until they reached the equator. Suddenly, the sounds of the wedding interrupt the Ancient Mariner's story. The Wedding Guest beats his chest impatiently as the blushing bride enters the reception hall and music plays. However, he is compelled to continue listening to the Ancient Mariner, who goes on with his tale. As soon as the ship reached the equator, a terrible storm hit and forced the ship southwards. The wind blew with such force that the ship pitched down in the surf as though it were fleeing an enemy. Then the sailors reached a calm patch of sea that was "wondrous cold", full of snow and glistening green icebergs as tall as the ship's mast. The sailors were the only living things in this frightening, enclosed world where the ice made terrible groaning sounds that echoed all around. Finally, an Albatross emerged from the mist, and the sailors revered it as a sign of good luck, as though it were a "Christian soul" sent by God to save them. No sooner than the sailors fed the Albatross did the ice break apart, allowing the captain to steer out of the freezing world. The wind picked up again, and continued for nine days. All the while, the Albatross followed the ship, ate the food the sailors gave it, and played with them. At this point, the Wedding Guest notices that the Ancient Mariner looks at once grave and crazed. He exclaims: "God save thee, ancient Mariner! / From the fiends that plague thee thus!- / Why lookst thou so?" The Ancient Mariner responds that he shot the Albatross with his crossbow.

Answer the following questions briefly

1. *How did the ancient mariner stop the wedding guest? Was the wedding guest happy to be stopped? Give reasons for your answer.*
2. *Describe the ancient mariner.*
3. *How does the mariner describe the movement of the ship as it sails away from the land?*
4. *What kind of weather did the sailors enjoy at the beginning of their journey? How has it been expressed in the poem?*
5. *How does the mariner express the fact that the ship was completely surrounded by icebergs?*
6. *How do we know that the albatross was not afraid of the humans? Why did the sailors hail it in God's name?*
7. *What was the terrible deed done by the Mariner? Why do you think he did it?*

Part II

Key points:

1. *They suffer punishment for his crime and are becalmed.*
2. *The crew at first cry out against him, but then commend him when the fog clears off.*
3. *They sail north and become becalmed at the equator.*
4. *They suffer from thirst. Slimy things are on the surface, and lights are on the water and masts at night.*
5. *A spirit follows them under the ship nine fathoms down.*
6. *They hang the bird around his neck.*

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Summary - Part 2

The ship sailed northward into the Pacific Ocean, and although the sun shone during the day and the wind remained strong, the mist held fast. The other sailors were angry with the Ancient Mariner for killing the Albatross, which they believed had saved them from the icy world by summoning the wind: "Ah wretch! Said they, the bird to slay / That made the breeze to blow!" Then the mist disappeared and the sun shone particularly brightly, "like God's own head." The sailors suddenly changed their opinion. They decided that the Albatross must have brought the must, and praise the Ancient Mariner for having killed it and rid them of the mist: "Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, / That bring the fog and mist."

The ship sailed along merrily until it entered an uncharted part of the ocean, and the wind disappeared. The ship could not move, and sat "As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean." Then the sun became unbearably hot just as the sailors ran out of water, leading up to

the most famous lines in the poem: "Water, water, everywhere, / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water, everywhere, / Nor any drop to drink." The ocean became a horrifying place; the water churned with "slimy" creatures, and at night, eerie fires seemed to burn on the ocean's surface. Some of the sailors dreamed that an evil spirit had followed them from the icy world, and they all suffered from a thirst so terrible that they could not speak. To brand the Ancient Mariner for his crime and place the guilt on him and him alone, the sailors hung the Albatross's dead carcass around his neck.

Answer the following questions briefly:

1. *How did the other mariners behave towards the Ancient Mariner at first? How many times did they change their mind about the Ancient Mariner? What does this tell us about their character?*
2. *How did the sailing conditions change after the ship had moved out of the land of mist and snow? What or who did the mariners blame for this change?*
3. *What is indicated by the line 'The bloody sun, at noon,/Right up above the mast did stand,/No bigger than the moon'?*
4. *How does the mariner describe the fact that they were completely motionless in the middle of the sea?*
5. *What is the irony in the ninth stanza? Explain it in your own words.*
6. *What is the narrator trying to convey through the description of the situation in the tenth and eleventh stanza?*
7. *What or who did the mariners feel was responsible for their suffering?*
8. *Why did the mariners hang the albatross around the neck of the Ancient Mariner?*

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

- i. Why did the Ancient Mariner stop the particular wedding guest to listen to his tale?*
- ii. Why did he have to tell his tale to someone?*
- iii. What is the poet trying to convey through this poem?*
- iv. Discuss the significance of the title.*
- v. Bring out the theme and punishment in 'The Rime of Ancient Mariner'.*