

Close Reading Questions for Understanding Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

Summary

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a harrowing literary ballad exploring the torments that guilt can inflict on the human soul and the terrible expiation (reparation or payment to right a wrong) required of those who sin against nature. The main characters are the ancient Mariner—an old weary sailor—and the Wedding Guest, to whom the Mariner tells his tale.

The mariner describes how his ship set sail under a good wind, heading toward the South Pole. On the way, he commits a senseless crime: killing an albatross that the sailors believe to be a good omen. As a result, the Polar Spirit—apparently a spirit of nature itself—pursues the ship, and suffering and punishment descend upon the vessel.

Two ghosts or specters, Death and Life-in-Death, play dice for the crew; all die except the Mariner, who has been won by Life-in-Death. Only when the Mariner recognizes the beauty of a passing group of water snakes and blesses them does the curse of the albatross, which has been hung around his neck to identify him as the murderer, begin to abate.

The Mariner then falls asleep. When he awakens, he finds that the ship is being sailed by the reanimated corpses of the crew. Eventually the Mariner realizes that a troop of angels is in control of the ship. He falls into a trance, during which the ship magically arrives back at his own country. The curse has been expiated, but as the harbor Pilot comes out to the ship, the battered vessel sinks in a violent whirlpool.

The Mariner rows the Pilot’s boat to shore and finally reaches land, where he confesses his sin to a holy Hermit. As his penance, the Mariner must wander the earth for the rest of his life, telling his fantastic tale to passing strangers.

from Elements of Literature, Holt Rinehart, & Winston, 2005

After reading the ballad “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” respond to the following questions or statements.

Part I

1. What is the effect of the contrast between the Mariner’s appearance and the feast that is described in Lines 7-8?
2. What examples of assonance and internal rhyme can you find in lines 5-8?
3. Ballads are about characters. What do you learn about the Mariner from words, appearance, and actions in lines 9-16?
4. What is the effect of interrupting the Mariner’s account with a description of the bassoon and the revelry of the guests at the wedding celebration?
5. To what does Coleridge compare the ship as it is caught up in the stormy blast in lines 45-50?
6. Why do you think Coleridge interrupts the basic stanza structure in lines 45-50?
7. What poetic technique is used in line 61 and to what effect?
8. What startling action does the Mariner take at the end of Part I?
9. What do you think is his motivation for doing so?

Part II

1. How do the internal rhymes of lines 93, 97, and 101 affect the meaning?

2. Once again Coleridge alters the stanza form in lines 91-102. Why change these particular stanzas?
3. What are the immediate consequences of the Mariner's actions in Part II?
4. Trace the changing attitudes of the crew members in Part II.

Part III

1. Explain the simile in lines 220—223 and its significance.

Part IV

1. Why does the fearful Wedding Guest interrupt the Mariner's story? Are his suspicions warranted?
2. What is the effect of the alliteration and assonance in lines 232-233?
3. How does Coleridge emphasize that the Mariner is now cut off from the rest of humanity in lines 232-235?
4. How do both supernatural and realistic elements work together in this ballad, particularly in lines 253-255?
5. Why is the stare of the dead men in lines 260-262 a curse on the Mariner?
6. What breaks the spell on the Mariner? Why do you think the Mariner finds the sea-snakes so beautiful?

Part V

1. What is the metaphorical meaning of the end of the drought?
2. To whom is the allusion in line 398 a reference? Why?

Part VI

1. Why do you think the Mariner doubts his vision of his homeland in lines 464-471?

Part VII

1. In lines 578-590, what brings the Mariner some peace? What is the Mariner's lifelong penance?
2. What is the theme or moral message in lines 612-617?
3. How relevant is the poem's theme today? Explain.
4. What is the result on the hearer of the tale, the Wedding Guest?

The Ballad as a Whole

Write a detailed paragraph in which you discuss the symbolic meaning of the albatross. Considering the albatross's role and concepts he may represent, how might the Mariner's journey be seen as a spiritual, as well as actual, journey?