

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(1772 - 1834)



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- **Type of Work:**
 - Lyrical fantasy ballad
- **Setting**
 - A sailing ship travelling the seas; late Medieval period
- **Principal Characters**
 - *The Ancient Mariner*, a sailor-storyteller
 - *The Wedding Guest*, a listener
 - *The Ship's Crew*
 - *The Albatross*, a symbolic representation of God's creatures - and Man's guilt
 - *The Hermit*, a rescuer representing God

Story Overview

Part 1

- Coleridge introduces his tale by describing an old gray-headed sailor who approaches three young men headed for a wedding celebration and compels one of them, the groom's next-of-kin, to hear his story.

- At first the intrusion is resented, but the story is remarkable indeed, and the listener - who, of course, represents you, the reader - soon falls captive to the building suspense, responding at first with fear and then with horror as the tale unfolds.

- There was little apprehension among the ship's crew as they sailed clear of the harbor, bound for the open sea. Several days out, however, a storm arose and the vessel was driven before the wind in a constant southerly direction, headed toward the South Pole

- As it entered the "land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen," a feeling of foreboding (= anxiety) came over the helpless inmates;

- and so it was with great relief that the crew eventually greeted the sight of an albatross - a huge seabird - flying through the fog toward them.

- "As if it had been a Christian soul," the Ancient Mariner tells his listener, "We hailed it in God's name."

- Everyone took this as a good omen, and the bird followed the ship faithfully as it returned northward. Then, one day, weary of the bird's incessant and now unnerving presence, the Mariner shot the albatross with his crossbow - and brought the curse down upon them all.

Part 2

- The crew at first berated (= *reproached*) their mate for killing the bird that had brought the change in the breeze. But as the ship made its way out of the fog and mist and continued on, they decided it must be the bird that had brought the mist. Perhaps their shipmate had rightfully killed it after all.

- The vessel sailed on northward until it reached the equator, where the breeze ceased and the craft became becalmed. After days without a breath of wind, it was decided by all that an avenging spirit had followed them from the land of mist and snow, leaving them surrounded only by foul (= *dirty, disgusting*) water.

- With the unabsolved curse thus restored, the thirsting crew ...

... angrily hung the dead albatross around the Mariner's neck, as a symbol of his guilt.

Part 3

- A phantom ship arrives, on board of which two women, Death and Life-in-Death, are casting lots for the crew's lives.

- Life-in-Death wins the Mariner, while Death takes the rest of the crew. When the Mariner finds himself alone and isolated in the world, he begins to realize the consequences of his hideous action.

Part 4

- The sense of solitude increases, and Nature fails to offer any consolation.
- But after seven days and seven nights, made even more dreadful by the sight of his dead companions, ...

- ... the Mariner charmed by the beauty of Nature, finally one evening, half consciously, blesses the water snakes. The re-established pact of love with the natural world, broken by the murder of the albatross, is now underlined by the albatross falling from the Mariner's neck into the sea, symbolizing the lifting of the load from a repenting soul.

Part 5

- The Mariner is now allowed to enjoy the gift of prayer again. He falls asleep and, when he awakes, he realizes that it is raining. (The rain, a natural Baptism, emphasizes the re-birth of the Mariner's soul).

- A troop of angelic spirits, moved to pity by his sincere repentance, enter the dead bodies of his shipmates and, although no wind is blowing, the ship moves on. But the Mariner still has more penance to do, as the crime has not yet been totally expiated.

Part 6

- His friends lie lifeless on the deck once more, and for some time the Mariner is haunted by their presence. (This stage may symbolize the remorse felt by the Mariner through the memories and fears.) He then suddenly catches sight of his beloved native country in the distance and, looking around the deck, sees a band of seraphs with one standing on each of the dead sailors (Remorse is usually followed by repentance which, in its turn, leads to God's forgiveness.)

- Meanwhile a pilot, who has probably noticed the ship from the shore, rows towards it together with a Holy Hermit.

Part 7

- Before they can reach the ship, the latter is unexpectedly shattered and sinks.

- But the Mariner is saved by the pilot and, after confessing to the Holy Hermit, he can return among his fellow men. But the punishment of Life-in-Death is still at work and a life-long sense of guilt will forever drive the Mariner to tell his story and make people wiser.

... and here is ... the end!

- *He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*
- The Wedding Guest, incidentally, never does go on to the wedding. So moved is he by the mood of the Mariner, that when the old man vanishes, he also departs, "a sadder and a wiser man."