The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAMUEL COLERIDGE

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in 1772 in Devon, England as the youngest and fourteenth child of Reverend John Coleridge. A brilliant student and a philosopher, Coleridge wrote renowned literary criticism as well as poetry. He traveled extensively in his life, and he is known to have struggled with an opium addiction. By publishing the joint work *Lyrical Ballads* with William Wordsworth in 1798 (in which *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was the longest piece) he launched the Romantic Movement in England. Coleridge's work was very well received by his contemporaries, and had a lasting impact on the Romantic Movement he started, on Gothic writers, and on American transcendentalism. Coleridge died in 1834 from heart failure and health complications likely linked to his drug use.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Coleridge was one of the founders of the Romantic Movement, which developed in the early 19th century in response to the Age of Enlightenment—Enlightenment thinkers in the 18th century placed reason above all else. Coleridge also wrote during the time of the budding Industrial Revolution, where technology seemed to threaten the balance of humanity's relationship with nature. Romantics valued emotion over reason and emphasized a glorification and appreciation of nature. The poem is not placed in any specific time period, though it is heavily invested in Romantic ideas, and it draws on both early explorers and contemporary accounts of wild discoveries and sea journeys. While the Age of Discovery was just ending, expeditions (especially for the North and South Poles) were being mounted as ships could sail across the globe with greater and greater ease.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many argue that *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was inspired by accounts of voyages to the Antarctic by James Cook or the Arctic by Thomas James. Wordsworth, however, claimed that the poem was inspired by a conversation between himself and the poet regarding George Shelvocke's *A Voyage Round the World by Way of the Great South Sea*, a 1726 book that Wordsworth was reading that included an account of a sailor shooting an albatross. The poem's influence on other writers spreads throughout the Romantic Movement, especially on other poets and the subgenre of lyrical ballads (*Lyrical Ballads* is also the title of the collection in which *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was published). Perhaps most famously, Coleridge's poem influenced Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, which, though it is in many ways a Gothic novel, includes parallels with the appreciation for the sublime and the exploration of the poles found in *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In her novel, Shelly references the poem directly.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
- **When Written:** 1797-1798
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** First published in 1798, revised and republished in 1817 and 1834
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism
- **Genre:** Poetry
- **Setting:** Wedding Reception, the Sea
- **Climax:** The Mariner's spiritual realization that he must value and respect all of God's creatures and live in harmony with and awe of nature.
- **Antagonist:** The Mariner himself, Death, Life-In-Death
- **Point of View:** The poem begins with a third person account of the Wedding Guest being stopped by the Ancient Mariner, then quickly transitions to a first person story told by the Mariner, occasionally interrupted by the Wedding Guest and on one occasion by two spirits called only "First Voice" and "Second Voice."

EXTRA CREDIT

Opium and Bipolar Disorder. Coleridge experienced anxiety and depression throughout much of his life, and it is theorized that he suffered from undiagnosed bipolar disorder. He was also often physically ill, and was given treatment with laudanum, which led to a serious opium addiction.

Opus Maximum. Though famous as a poet, Coleridge also wrote extensively in prose. He wrote literary criticism and philosophy, including a massive work called *Opus Maximum*, which attempted to reconcile reason with faith. He was unable to complete this project during his lifetime and left behind only fragments. These obscure fragments were mostly unknown until they were published in 2002, and there is still no critical consensus on whether *Opus Maximum* is a success or not, and what exactly Coleridge was trying to do in writing it.

PLOT SUMMARY

The poem begins by introducing the Ancient Mariner, who, with his "glittering **eye**," stops a Wedding Guest from attending a nearby wedding celebration. The Mariner stops the young man to tell him the story of a ship, providing no introduction but simply beginning his tale. Despite the Wedding Guest's efforts to leave, the Mariner continues to speak.

The Mariner's story begins with the ship leaving harbor and sailing southward. A tremendous storm then blows the ship even further to the South Pole, where the crew are awed as they encounter mist, snow, cold, and giant glaciers. An **Albatross** breaks the pristine lifelessness of the Antarctic. The sailors greet it as a good omen, and a new wind rises up, propelling the ship. Day after day the albatross appears, appearing in the morning when the sailors call for it, and soaring behind the ship. But then as the other sailor's cry out in dismay, the Mariner, for reasons unexplained, shoots and kills the albatross with his crossbow.

At first, the other Sailors are furious with the Mariner for killing the bird which they believed a god omen and responsible for making the breezes blow. But after the bird has been killed the fog clears and the fair breeze continues, blowing the ship north into the Pacific, and the crew comes to believe the bird was the source of the fog and mist and that the killing is justified. It is then that the wind ceases, and the ship becomes trapped on a vast, calm sea. The Sailors and the Mariner become increasingly thirsty, and some sailors dream that an angered Spirit has followed them from the pole. The crew then hangs the albatross around the Mariner's neck.

In this terrible calm, trapped completely by the watery ocean that they cannot drink, the men on the ship grow so thirsty that they cannot even speak. When the Mariner sees what he believes is a ship approaching, he must bite his arm and drink his own blood so that he is able to alert the crew, who all grin out of joy. But the joy fades as the ghostly ship, which sails without wind, approaches. On its deck, Death and Life-in-Death gamble with dice for the lives of the Sailors and the Mariner. After Life-in-Death wins the soul of the Mariner, the Sailors begin to die of thirst, falling to the deck one by one, each staring at the Mariner in reproach.

Surrounded by the dead Sailors and cursed continuously by their gaze, the Mariner tries to turn his eyes to heaven to pray, but fails. It is only in the **Moonlight**, after enduring the horror of being the only one alive among the dead crew that the Mariner notices beautiful **Water Snakes** swimming beside the ship. At this moment he becomes inspired, and has a spiritual realization that all of God's creatures are beautiful and must be treated with respect and reverence. With this realization, he is finally able to pray, and the albatross fell from his neck and sunk into the sea.

The Mariner falls into a kind of stupor, and then wakes to find the dead Sailors' bodies reanimated by angels and at work on the ship. Powered by the Spirit from the South Pole, the ship races homeward, where the Mariner sees a choir of angels leave the bodies of the deceased Sailors. After this angels' chorus, the Mariner perceives a small boat on which a Pilot, the Pilot's Boy, and a Hermit approach. As they get closer, the Mariner's ship suddenly sinks, but he wakes to find himself in the Pilot's boat. When the Mariner speaks, the Pilot and Hermit are stunned, by fear. The Hermit prays. The Mariner, in turn, saves his own saviors, and rows them to land, where he begs the Hermit to grant him absolution for his sins. The Hermit crosses himself, and asks the Mariner "what manner of man art thou?" The Mariner then feels compelled to tell his story.

The Mariner concludes his tale by explaining that as he travels from land to land he is always plagued by that same compulsion to tell his tale, that he experiences a peculiar agony if he doesn't give in to his urge to share the story, and that he can tell just from looking at their faces which men must hear his tale. He ends with the explicit lesson that prayer is the greatest joy in life, and the best prayers come from love and reverence of all of God's creation. Thus he moves onward to find the next person who must hear his story, leaving the Wedding Guest "a sadder and a wiser man."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Ancient Mariner – The protagonist (and in many ways the antagonist) of the poem. The poem is largely the story of how, while sailing in Antarctic waters, the Mariner killed the **albatross**, and then how both nature and the supernatural rose up against him and his shipmates, until the Mariner comes to recognize that all of God's creatures are beautiful and must be treated with reverence. Put another way, the poem focuses first around the Mariner's sin, and then his penance for that sin. And yet the Mariner's story is also not quite as simple as all that. First, the poem never explains why the Mariner kills the albatross – does he kill it out of a hatred of nature, or out of a desire to master and control nature, or for some other reason entirely? Second, despite the Mariner's penance and realization, the absolution he receives is only partial: he regains the ability to pray, but at the same time he finds himself compelled to tell his story to others, such as the Wedding Guest. He is doomed to forever spread his story and instruct potential sinners in the best way to live, which is in harmony with and reverent awe of nature and God's creations. The Mariner becomes a kind of herald of the natural and spiritual worlds that his killing of the albatross outraged, and with his strange and intense demeanor, his "glittering **eye,**" his ability to recognize from their faces which men must hear his story, and his overwhelmingly compelling storytelling itself, he also takes

on aspects of the supernatural or spiritual world that he experienced.

The Wedding Guest – The Wedding Guest is a man on his way to a wedding celebration – he seems to be a relative of the groom, a young man, perhaps in his twenties, who enjoys a good party – when he is chosen by the Mariner to hear his tale. The Wedding Guest attempts to evade the Mariner, to continue on to the wedding and not hear the Mariner's story. At one point he calls out in a kind of agony because he hears the instruments playing at the party; at other times he calls out in terror at the events the Mariner is relating. But either way, the Wedding Guest cannot help but listen to the story. By the end of the poem, after he has listened to the Mariner's story, the Wedding Guest has become "a sadder and wiser man," with the implication that the Mariner's story has changed him, made him less interested in revelry and more concerned with the spiritual and natural concerns that the Mariner's story describes.

Sailors – The Sailors are the nameless crewmembers that accompany the Mariner on his journey. The sailors are a strange case in the poem; they do not commit any sin as terrible as that of the Mariner's shooting of the **albatross**, and yet they seem to be punished more horribly. The sailors in fact consider the albatross to be a good omen, and they curse the Mariner at first after he kills it. However, when in the moments after the death of the albatross dies, the wind does not abate and the fog lifts, the crew changes its mind, and says the Mariner was right to kill it. It may be that the crew's fatal punishment arises from this change of mind, its lack of faith in its earlier (apparently correct) assessment of the albatross, or just in the weakness of its condemnation of the narrator. Or perhaps the sailors are just collateral damage in the Mariner's own punishment. Regardless, as the ship becomes becalmed after the death of the albatross, they first become utterly dehydrated, and then fall dead when Death wins their souls in his gambling game with Life-In-Death. Later, angels eerily reanimate the Sailors, and their corpses aid in the Mariner's penance. But unlike the Mariner, the sailors are not given life or absolution at the end of the tale, and when the Mariner hears the sailors' souls leaving their bodies upon their deaths, it's not at all clear where those souls are going.

Life-in-Death – This haunting figure is found, along with Death, on the ghost ship that approaches the Mariner and the Sailors when their own ship is becalmed after the Mariner's killing of the albatross. Life-in-Death is described as having red lips, yellow hair, and white skin. She throws dice with Death and wins the Mariner's soul, and given the Mariner's subsequent inability to pray until he has completed his penance, there is the suggestion that he truly experiences a kind of life-in-death, not in the sense of being a zombie, but in the sense of being cut off from both the natural and spiritual worlds even as he continues to exist, until he completes his penance.

First Voice and Second Voice – These two voices, the First Voice and Second Voice, are introduced at the end of Part Six in the poem, and continue into the beginning of Part Seven. The voices are supernatural spirits that discuss the penance the Mariner has done and the continued penance that will be required of him.

Hermit – The Hermit is the third person aboard the small boat that rescues the Mariner. He is depicted as a man of God and of nature – a man who exemplifies the right way to live – and once on land the Mariner calls him a holy man and begs the Hermit to grant him absolution for his sins. The Hermit in return asks the Mariner to explain who he is, which begins the Mariner's compulsion to tell his own story.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Lonesome Spirit from the South Pole – This Spirit is one of the supernatural elements present in Coleridge's depiction of God's created nature. The Spirit follows the ship from the South Pole, traps it on the calm sea, and later, after the Mariner's penance, drags it back to human shores.

Death – Death is found aboard the ghostly ship that approaches the Mariner's ship when it is becalmed after the death of the albatross. Death gambles by throwing dice with Life-in-Death for the souls of the Sailors and the Mariner. Death loses the Mariner, but wins the souls of the Sailors.

Pilot – The pilot of the small ship that appears after the Mariner sees the beauty in the water snakes. When the Mariner's own ship subsequently sinks, the Pilot helps rescue the Mariner, but is shocked when it turns out that the Mariner is alive.

Pilot's Boy – The Pilot's Boy is a young boy who serves under the Pilot. He rows the small boat that rescues the Mariner until he goes crazy upon seeing that the Mariner is somehow alive. The Pilot's Boy quips that the Mariner must be the devil himself.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE NATURAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

Coleridge was one of the founders of the Romantic movement, a literary movement that developed in the early 19th century in response to the Age of Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophy esteemed reason above all else, and flourished in the 18th century, as well as contributed to the budding Industrial Revolution and the ways

that growing industry and technology seemed to shift the balance in man's relationship with nature. Romantics valued emotion over reason, and they glorified and appreciated nature. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* fits into the Romantic tradition. The poem begins at the wedding feast, with the Wedding Guest observing and enjoying a quintessentially civilized setting in which nature is subdued. But when the Ancient Mariner imposes himself on the Wedding Guest and tells his story, the scene (and the Wedding Guest as audience) shift from comfortable civilization into nature, in this case aboard a ship sailing across the globe. Cast into the world, the Mariner must contend with nature in the form of violent storms and the dangerous sea, and he must survive the perils of the natural world. In this light, the Mariner's killing of the **albatross** can be seen as an attempt to master nature, to assert the power of man over the power of nature.

But the poem presents nature as more powerful, awe inspiring, and terrifying than man can comprehend. And, further, the poem depicts any attempt to master nature as pointless. Nature is simply too powerful, as is evident when the sudden lack of wind strands the ship in desolate waters, and the Mariner and sailors begin to die of thirst. The poem demonstrates that contending with, merely surviving, or attempting to master nature are the wrong ways for humankind to approach the natural world.

The poem, though, does not only portray nature as a kind of passive elemental force that is too powerful for men to conquer. Instead, the poem conceives of nature as being an expression of the spiritual world. This relationship between nature and the spiritual world explains the terrible and supernatural reaction that the Mariner and his shipmates must face after he kills the albatross. Nature, as the poem has it, is God's creation, and therefore when a person interacts with nature they also interact with the spiritual world. And so, when the Mariner attempts to master or control nature (such as by killing the albatross), it is an affront not just to nature, but to the spiritual world and to God as well. Harming nature, then, is a moral failing. It is a sin. Such sins lead to punishment, and the punishment comes as a combination of the natural and the spiritual: it is *super*natural. This supernatural punishment is expressed when elemental spirits arise and drag or halt the Mariner's ship, and by the haunting Death and Life-In-Death who harvest human souls.

It is only when the Mariner learns to live with and value the natural world, as he does when he sees the beauty in the **Water Snakes** that, it seems likely, he previously would have despised, does the punishment against him ease. The poem, then, casts the appreciation and valuing of nature, the act of embracing Romanticism, not just as important in and of itself, but as above all a spiritual, religious necessity.

THE MUNDANE AND THE SUBLIME

The idea of the sublime is an important Romantic idea. In modern times, the word "sublime" usually refers to something especially breathtaking or beautiful. But as demonstrated by the strange beauty – both terrible and wonderful – that Coleridge presents in *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Romantic idea of the sublime isn't confined to just beauty, but rather suggests an overwhelming awe, and is often connected to nature. In the poem, for instance, the natural world is filled with beautiful yet horrible sights and events. The storm, which drives the ship to the pole, is incredibly powerful and majestic at once. The ice, snow, and giant, ship-high glaciers that the Mariner encounters in the pole are at once incredibly beautiful, eerie, and dangerous. The sublime then can be seen as the intersection of beauty and terror, awe and horror. Thus the sublime, like nature, must be approached with the right attitude. If we approach it and only appreciate its beauty, we risk falling prey to its danger, and if we approach the sublime only with fear of its horror, we mistakenly forget the awe that God's creations should rightly inspire. And the poem makes it clear that experiencing the sublime can transform, just as it transforms both the Mariner and the Wedding Guest through the Mariner's story.

The poem does not only find the sublime in nature, however. As described by the Mariner, it is also possible to see the act of prayer as sublime, as a spiritual, powerful act within a bounded, mundane civilization. In this view, both praying and appreciating nature involve both the beauty and overwhelming awe of connecting to God, of seeing past the mundane moments of daily life in civilization to the sublime.

In contrast, it is possible to see the Mariner's killing of the **Albatross** as an attempt to assert the mundane over the sublime, or to force what is sublime (an uncanny, flying animal appearing out of the fog) to become mundane (a dead bird).

SIN AND PENANCE

In the context of the spirituality that pervades the poem, the Mariner's story can be seen as one of Sin and Penance. In shooting the innocent **albatross** he commits a sin (against both nature and God, since one is the expression of the other). The Mariner is then punished: he suffers deprivations and horrors until he learns to appreciate and love the natural and supernatural world that the albatross symbolized, and then he is absolved of his crime. Such a story of sin and penance, of punishment and absolution is common across many cultures and belief systems, including Christianity. And yet, at the same time, the poem's treatment of the story isn't quite so simple.

For one thing, the Mariner is only partially saved. Once his penance is complete and he learns to appreciate nature, his overtly supernatural torments are ended and he can enjoy the

beauty of nature and the blessing of prayer. But, at the same time, he is compelled to continue telling his story indefinitely, or else suffer a kind of agony. There is no indication that he will ever be truly forgiven or absolved of his duty to share his experience, and in a way, this itself is another punishment. And yet, it too can be viewed as a blessing, since through telling his story he is given the gift of being able to save others, as, implied at the end of the poem, he saves the Wedding Guest.

STORYTELLING AND INTERPRETATION

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is very focused on storytelling. The Mariner stops one of every three people he sees, since he knows that certain people need to hear his story, and he simply begins telling his tale. And the tale itself is so compelling that his listeners can do nothing but listen. Further, the Mariner can also be read as a kind of stand-in for a writer. The Mariner, after his experiences, is doomed to feel a perpetual need to tell this story, a never-ending urge that burns inside of him. And yet, at the same time, speech and storytelling is portrayed in the poem as a power and a blessing. The Mariner has a "strange power of speech," and tells his story not simply to tell it, but because he wants and needs to *communicate*, to pass his own experience on to others so as to save them. This simultaneous curse and blessing of storytelling can be seen as a metaphor for storytelling in general, for the way that a writer feels compelled to tell his or her story, a compulsion to communicate. Finally, the poem asserts that stories really do have unique powers of communication. The poem is a story within a story, with the Wedding Guest's encounter with the Mariner serving as a frame for the Mariner's own story. This frame allows the reader to both hear the Mariner's own story, and to witness the way the story transforms the Wedding Guest. The poem, in other words, insists on the power of storytelling, and shows how it can change, and improve, people.

Even as the poem explores storytelling – the human compulsion to tell stories and the power of those stories – it also investigates the just as human compulsion to *interpret* stories, to figure out what those stories mean. Both readers of the poem and the characters within the poem naturally try to interpret the information and stories they are given. Indeed, the Mariner's slaying of the **Albatross** – an act that is never explained, and because of that seems the product of a kind of strange compulsion – can be seen as an act of interpretation. There is a long tradition that sees birds, and albatross in particular, as having the ability to exist between realms, as being both natural and supernatural, both mortal and spiritual. By killing the bird, the Mariner asserts an interpretation on the bird – that it is natural, mortal, and deceased. And after the albatross dies, the crew at first interprets the act as a sin, and then when nothing goes wrong they change their interpretation completely, saying the mariner was right to kill the bird. But the poem suggests that interpretation carries risks: after the mariner kills the albatross, reducing it to mere mortality, and the crew decides that killing it was justified, all of them are harshly punished.

Similarly, Coleridge's notes that annotate his poem can be seen as fulfilling both the urge to tell stories and the desire to interpret. In some moments, Coleridge's annotations seem excessive, and he seems simply to summarize and add extraneous details. He over-tells the story because of his own urge, which mirrors that of the Mariner. In other cases, his annotations are interpretive, giving explanations and implying morals in the story. And yet, these interpretations don't always come across as helpful, and sometimes seem contradictory or incoherent when taken together. Put another way: Coleridge's own annotations of his poem can be seen as showing the *limits* of interpretation, as showing that, just as the Mariner must learn to appreciate nature in its entirety, for what it is rather than reducing it to what it might mean for him, a person reading the poem should do the same, and appreciate it in its wholeness and be wary of picking it apart, of reducing it, and lessening its power.

CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

Many read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as containing explicit Christian allegory. Despite the fact that Coleridge himself said that the poem had no explicit moral, such a reading is difficult to ignore given the overt Christian lesson that the Mariner teaches at the end of the poem. He says that he takes immense joy in prayer, and instructs an appreciation and respect for God, God's creatures, and all of nature. Further, his killing of the **Albatross**, a great sin and crime, can be seen as an allegorical representation of one or more Christian stories. The sin can be a parallel to Adam and Eve's original sin, where the act of killing the bird instigates a break with nature, bringing the Mariner out of harmony with the natural world and causing punishment akin to the Fall of man. More obvious is the parallel to Judas' betrayal of Christ, in which the albatross is a symbol for Christ and the Mariner's sin is a betrayal. This parallel can be drawn with both Judas' betrayal, and the proverbial sinner's betrayal in committing any sin. The Judas allegory is strengthened by the fact that the Mariner is then forced to wear the albatross in place of a traditional cross around his neck.

However, the text is not quite so neat as to allow for only a straightforward, Christian allegorical reading. The supernatural elements and the Mariner's own path through sin and penance break the typical mold of a Christian allegory, and the poem also contains various pagan elements that exist side-by-side with Christian ideas. Ultimately, it might be more fruitful to view the poem not as a Christian allegory, but as encompassing Christian symbols as part of an effort to portray a universal whole that at once includes the truths of Christianity, but is not

solely limited to those truths or the particularly Christian way of seeing those truths. Nonetheless, recognizing the way that the poem captures and fuses multiple aspects of Christian symbolism can help as a lens to think about it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ALBATROSS

The **albatross** is a complicated symbol within the poem. Historically, albatross were seen by sailors as omens of good luck, and initially the albatross symbolizes this to the sailors when it appears just as a wind picks up to move the ship. Further, birds in general were often seen as having the ability to move between the earthly and spiritual realms, and this albatross in particular—with its habit of appearing from out of the fog—seems to be both natural and supernatural. Thus the albatross can be seen as symbolizing the connection between the natural and spiritual worlds, a connection that the rest of the poem will show even more clearly, and it can further be seen as a symbol of the sublime (the unearthly bird) as it sports with the mundane (the ship).

With the Mariner's killing of the bird, the symbol becomes more complicated still. First, the killing of the innocent bird, and the Mariner's line that "Instead of the cross, the Albatross / About my neck was hung," suggests that the Albatross can be read as a symbol of Christ, with the Mariner as the betraying Judas (particularly as the Albatross is killed by a *cross*-bow). The dead albatross, also, can be read more generally as a mark of sin.

But as all these symbols build up around the albatross, it also starts to be possible to see the albatross as a symbol of *resistance* to symbolism: a symbol that is not a symbol of nature but rather something that Coleridge has created to be *similar to* nature in the sense of its complexity, its resistance to being easily analyzed or pinned down. The poem insists that nature is something to be revered just as God is revered, but that, like God, nature is beyond both the mastery and comprehension of mankind. And in the albatross, with its multiplying potential symbols, Coleridge has created something similar. This idea is further supported by the fact that disaster strikes the Mariner and the sailors precisely after they "interpret" the albatross. The Mariner does so by killing it: what was once so many things, natural and supernatural, has been reduced to just being dead. And the crew then interpret the Mariner's act as first a crime, and then a justified killing—at which point nature and the supernatural rear up against them, a literal reaction against these men's "interpretation."

EYES

Other symbols and many of the themes in the poem exert their presence through the **eyes**. Firstly, the Mariner holds the Wedding Guest with his story, but also with his "glittering eye." The eye then symbolizes both a means of control and a means of communication, which makes sense given the spellbinding power of storytelling in the poem. When words fail, humans communicate through their eyes. This point is also exemplified by the silent curses the Sailors give the Mariner when they are too thirsty to speak. This form of communication is powerful, direct, and primal, and it is also continued and pushed into the realm of the supernatural and sublime when the communicative gaze continues even after the sailors' deaths.

But eyes do not only symbolize a means of primal, ineffably communication between humans. They also symbolize the means of communication between humans and the natural world, and through it, God. It is through the eyes that we observe God's creatures, nature, and the sublime: the Mariner observes the **Albatross**, the **Sun and Moon**, the sublime, and the rest of the natural world with the power of sight. Some of the most terrifying moments of the poem are given through the means of sight and the eyes, for example, when the Mariner spies a ship and realizes its skeletal, ghostly nature as it approaches. The communication signified here is indicating that penance or punishment is coming, but the communication that the eye symbolizes and enables can also carry a message of salvation, as it is the sight of the radiant beauty of the swimming snakes that allows the Mariner to realize his error.

In another way, then, the eye can symbolize the limitations of the poem and of storytelling itself. The Mariner (and through him Coleridge) can use words to communicate the glory of God and the beauty of the world, but this communication will always be indirect. By seeing, we can take one step closer to God, to an appreciation of the sublime in nature, and to understanding for ourselves the lessons which the poem seeks to impart.

THE SUN AND MOON

The **Sun and Moon** symbolize the competing influences on the Mariner's journey and on the world. The two compete with each other, at times embodying the forces of both the natural and supernatural world. The sun is associated with blood, heat, dryness, and the thirst that ultimately kills the Sailors. It symbolizes both the majesty and the terror of the vast natural world, as it is described with sublime beauty and is also used to tell which direction the ship is traveling. The moon, as it is responsible for shaping the tides, symbolizes the supernatural and divine influences on nature. We can note that the ghostly ship of Death and Life-in-Death is superimposed over the sun, before the sun sets and is replaced by the moon. It is then by moonlight that the next stage of

penance and the Mariner's spiritual awakening take place. But it is this cyclic process and competition between the sun and moon that, together, symbolizes the unity of God's creation, divine influence, and the cyclic process of sin, penance, and absolution that Christians experience.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Complete Poems* published in 0.

Part I Quotes

He holds him with his skinny hand,
'There was a ship,' quoth he.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), The Wedding Guest

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

The Ancient Mariner has stopped one of three young men on the way to a wedding. When the Wedding Guest asks him why he is being stopped, the Mariner places his hand on the Guest and simply begins telling his story: "There was a ship." This powerful start to the story demonstrates the power that storytelling has to enthrall and compel listeners. Readers may become invested in the Mariner's tale even before the Wedding Guest accepts that he must hear it. The power of storytelling itself holds the Wedding Guest just as much as the Mariner's old, skinny hand and "glittering eye" do.

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.

It ate the food it ne'er had eat,
And round and round it flew.
The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
The helmsman steered us through!

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), Sailors

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61-70

Explanation and Analysis

The Mariner's ship has faced a massive storm and sailed southward to the South Pole to escape. There it floats in mist, fog, and snow amidst ice and glaciers in pristine silence (besides cracking ice) and an absence of life. But the Albatross, which cuts through the surreal lifelessness of the South Pole, is then introduced as a kind of miraculous figure. The bird appears as both a natural and supernatural object, as it materializes through the fog. As soon as it is introduced, it is also associated with God and Christianity, with the Sailors hailing it excitedly as if it were a fellow Christian.

The crew treats the bird as a good omen, giving it the status of supernatural. But by feeding it, they acknowledge its status as a mortal, natural being. Their celebration of the bird, then, is an approximation of the Romantic ideal, even if it is not understood as a spiritual experience. The Sailors appreciate the bird, and the natural world seems to reward them for their recognition, as the ice splits and allows the ship to continue its journey.

We can also note that the Albatross seems to take joy in following and playing with the ship, and benefits from their kindness. The Mariner to suggest that never before has the bird been so plentifully fed: "It ate the food it ne'er had eat." This mutually beneficial relationship and the apparent benefit to the Albatross makes its death all the more tragic and sinful.

'God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus! –
Why look'st thou so?'-
With my cross-bow I shot the Albatross.

Related Characters: The Wedding Guest (speaker), The Ancient Mariner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 79-83

Explanation and Analysis

The Mariner has just introduced the Albatross, which flies around and follows the ship. But suddenly, the Wedding

Guest interrupts the story (a masterful storytelling technique on the part of Coleridge) since the Mariner's face apparently contains some sort of agony. Coleridge here gives us the Wedding Guest's reaction to the Mariner's face in order to covey how plagued he is by what information will follow, adding to the building sense of tension and anticipation.

The Mariner then continues in his tale and reveals the sin that will set in motion a series of horrifying experiences as part of his penance: he shot the Albatross with a cross-bow. We can note that the Mariner offers no explanation for why he shot the bird. We can attempt to understand it through various frameworks, however. In one framework, the slaughter can be seen as an effort to assert human mastery over nature. Related is the notion that killing the bird is an attempt to assert the mundane and civilized over what is naturally sublime, a rejection of the Romantic ideal and a denial of what is majestic in nature. And in a third framework, the act of killing the Albatross is seen as an interpretive act, whereby the Mariner gives in to the natural desire of humans to interpret; he cannot reconcile with the Albatross's ethereal existence across boundaries (natural, supernatural, sublime, mortal, an omen) and so he kills it to force the bird into one category (dead). But ultimately, readers are not given an indication of the Mariner's motive. Rather, we only see the dire consequences of the act.

Part II Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), The Lonesome Spirit from the South Pole

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115-122

Explanation and Analysis

After the Mariner kills the Albatross, for a time the wind remains good and the fog dissipates. The crew briefly shifts from cursing the Mariner to justifying his actions. But soon, under influence of the Lonesome Spirit from the South Pole, the breeze dies down and the ship becomes stranded. The Sailors then suffer in the heat, beginning the first stage of the Mariner's penance. Day after day, the ship remains stuck and still, as if it is merely a ship in a painting.

In this state, the Mariner and the Sailors begin dying of thirst. The second quatrain (four-line stanza) excerpted here plays with the irony of the situation, and also contains one of Coleridge's most famous (and often misquoted) lines. They are surrounded by water, but since it is seawater, they cannot drink it. This predicament is part of the Mariner's penance, which is influenced by the supernatural spirits, but it also exhibits some of the sublime terror and beauty of the natural world. The sea is at once compared to a painting and a means of torture and death. Thus while the Mariner doesn't yet take the correct approach, the poet describes the scene from firmly within the Romantic mindset.

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

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), Sailors

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139-143

Explanation and Analysis

Though they first justified the Mariner's decision to kill the Albatross when the fog lifted and the breeze continued, in face of perilous thirst and torturous stillness, the Sailors have turned back against the Mariner. They seek to place the entirety of the blame on the Mariner (whose actions may indeed be the cause of their own downfall), and even want to curse the Mariner, but their thirst is so severe that none of them are able to speak. Thus, as it is explained in the excerpt, they use "evil looks" as the means for communication. The eyes, we see, serve to communicate when words fail or are prevented.

After cursing the Mariner with their eyes, the Sailors hang the Albatross around his neck—a burden for him to bear in place of a cross. In this way, they attempt to put the responsibility of the sin entirely on him, and mark him as a sinner. Such a gesture is one of the aspects of the poem that clearly calls for an interpretation along the lines of Christian

allegory. The Albatross as a symbol of Christ is also strengthened by the gesture, as the dead bird on the Mariner replaces Jesus on the Crucifix.

Part III Quotes

❝ With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
We could nor laugh nor wail;
Through utter drought all dumb we stood!
I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,
And cried, A sail! a sail!

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), Death, Life-in-Death, Sailors

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 157-161

Explanation and Analysis

These lines give some of the most powerful, chilling poetry of the entire work. After the Sailors hang the Albatross around the Mariner's neck, the ship remains stuck and the crew remains so thirsty that they cannot speak. Under a blood-red sun, the Mariner notices a tiny speck approaching on the horizon. This speck provides a moment of hope for the Mariner and drama in the story, as it is revealed to be a ship, and then a phantom ship carrying Death and Life-in-Death.

Seeing the ship, the Mariner is struck with the common desire to share what he sees—to communicate. But nature (and the supernatural forces surrounding it) has taken his ability to use language. In order to win back the ability to speak, the Mariner must pay an painful price: he bites his arm and drinks his own blood, wetting his mouth enough that he can speak. The consumption of blood seems at first horrifying, but it can also be made to fit within the Christian tradition, as Christians consume the blood of Christ (whether literally or metaphorically, depending on the tradition) through the form of wine when taking the Eucharistic sacrament.

Note that the poetry of these lines underscores the uncanny nature of the incident. The stanza contains five lines, as opposed to the common four or six, and is filled with formal features. We can note, for example, alliteration in "black / baked" and "drought/ dumb" as well as the internal rhyme of "unslaked" and "baked," which somehow makes the five line stanza flow beautifully. The beauty and poetic craft that Coleridge injects here makes this moment and its description an example of the sublime in and of itself.

❝ One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,
Too quick for groan or sigh,
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
And cursed me with his eye.

Four times fifty living men,
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
They dropped down one by one.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), Life-in-Death, Death, Sailors

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 212-219

Explanation and Analysis

The ghostly ship, carrying Death and Life-in-Death, has pulled alongside the Mariner and the crew. The two haunting figures have gambled for the lives of the Sailors and the Mariner; Life-in-Death wins the Mariner, implying that the Sailors are won by Death. The Mariner then must face dire penance through a horrifying experience of life within death. As part of this punishment (and perhaps a punishment for them), the two hundred Sailors one by one curse the Mariner with their eyes, before dying in the moonlight.

The lifeless thumping of the Sailors' bodies can be seen as a reminder of the danger and power of nature and supernatural beings. We can note that as they die, unable to speak, they are still able to communicate their curses and hatred through their eyes, the primal means of wordless communication that is used throughout the poem. These eyes, we will see below, are able to convey curses even after death.

Part IV Quotes

An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), Life-in-Death, Sailors

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 257-262

Explanation and Analysis

The Sailors have died one by one, and the Mariner here experiences penance through the forms of solitude and horror. To emphasize the terror of being surrounded by these wide-eyed corpses, the Mariner evokes an "orphan's curse," which would supposedly have the terrible effect of dragging even a spirit from on high down to hell. "More horrible than that, " he suggests, is the curse found in a dead man's eye. We can note that the communicative power of the eye does not cease even in death, existing as an echo of life within death.

This echo is fitting, given the punishment (penance) that Life-in-Death enacts. Surrounded by corpses and death, the Mariner ironically cannot die himself, even over the course of a week. This lingering amidst death brings the Mariner's isolation and desperation well beyond the experience of being stuck at sea surrounded by a speechless, but still living crew.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware,

The selfsame moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 282-291

Explanation and Analysis

After the Mariner is cursed by the dead eyes of the Sailors (for an entire week), the moon rises higher in the sky. In the moonlight, the Mariner observes radiant water snakes swimming beside the ship. At their sight, he comes to the central spiritual realization of the poem. He exclaims with joy that these are happy creatures, beautiful beyond words, and he becomes possessed with love for them and a desire to bless them. He has come to appreciate nature in a Romantic and spiritual mindset, the key lesson he ultimately hopes to impart (as opposed to his earlier hatred of the "slimy creatures" living in the water around the ship).

Once he makes this realization (which is enabled both by the moonlight and the communicative power of his eyes), the Mariner is able to pray once more. The lapse in communication with God has been repaired by, finally, a proper approach to nature and the sublime: respect, reverence, and appreciation. With this attitude the Mariner turns back to prayer, and the Albatross slips off his neck, signifying that (for the moment) he has been absolved of his sin.

Part V Quotes

'Is it he?' quoth one, 'Is this the man?
By him who died on cross,
With his cruel bow he laid full low
The harmless Albatross.
...
Quoth he, 'The man hath penance done,
And penance more will do.'

Related Characters: First Voice and Second Voice (speaker), The Lonesome Spirit from the South Pole, The Ancient Mariner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 398-409

Explanation and Analysis

After the Mariner's momentary absolution and spiritual

realization, he is also able to fall into sleep, and finally can drink water. But after nature rages and angels possess and reanimate the Sailors' bodies, the Mariner is thrown into a fit. Within this strange dreamspace, the Mariner hears the First Voice and the Second voice conferring about who he is ("is it he?") and what he has done ("With his cruel bow he laid full low / the harmless Albatross"). The excerpt here demonstrates how overt Coleridge's storytelling is at certain moments. One of the voices says explicitly that the Mariner has done penance, and will do more penance in the future. This line proves to be true in the immediate future, and for the rest of the Mariner's existence, as the poem ultimately implies that his penance is never ending and he is never completely absolved.

Part VI Quotes

This seraph-band, each waved his hand:
It was a heavenly sight!
They stood as signals to the land,
Each one a lovely light;

This seraph-band, each waved his hand,
No voice did they impart –
No voice; but oh! the silence sank
Like music on my heart.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), The Lonesome Spirit from the South Pole, Sailors

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 492-499

Explanation and Analysis

After a race homeward, powered by the Lonesome Spirit (who is in turn instructed by angels) the sun rises and the angels leave the Sailors' bodies. Rather than singing, as they have done before, the seraphs simply wave at the Mariner, putting on a heavenly display to be experienced through the eyes. This display is essentially silent, which, the Mariner suggests, carries its own type of divine music. Furthermore, the lines themselves are musical, as each stanza begins with the same first line and contains strong rhymes and perfected rhythm and meter. Here, the Mariner is so connected with nature and the sublime that he is able to have a direct spiritual experience, without the presence of the lenses that he requires in many other moments.

It is the Hermit good!
He singeth loud his godly hymns
That he makes in the wood.
He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away
The Albatross's blood.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), Hermit

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 508-513

Explanation and Analysis

As the Pilot, the Pilot's Boy, and the Hermit approach the Mariner, the Mariner's ship is sinking. But rather than worrying about the fate of his ship, the Mariner focuses on the Hermit, who presents an example of a good man of God who does not require such trials as the Mariner to maintain the appropriate attitude. Note that the Hermit is connected with nature through the reference to the "wood," presumably the place he lives.

The Mariner views the Hermit as a means to conclude his journey and bring a final form of penance and absolution, whatever it may be. He hopes the Hermit will "shrieve" him, which is archaic for shrive, which means take confession, apply penance, and absolve. We can note that he hopes the Hermit will wash away the Albatross's symbolic blood and lift away the guilt of the crime. This suggestion is also complicated by the fact that the Albatross is a symbol for Christ, and Christ's blood is typically the *means* of redemption and washing away sin in Christian allegory and doctrine.

Part VII Quotes

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), The Wedding Guest, Hermit

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 586-560

Explanation and Analysis

The Mariner has been rescued by the Hermit and Pilot and is now safely on land. There he begs the Hermit to absolve him of his sin, and is first prompted to tell his story. Here, the Mariner explains the perpetual state of penance he now occupies: he wanders eternally, intermittently succumbing to the agony within him that forces him to tell his story.

He travels from land to land and employs his "strange power of speech," which seems to be granted to him by the journey and for the purpose of sharing his lesson. He also demonstrates another way that eyes communicate here: he knows to whom he must tell his story by seeing faces. We can note that storytelling here is figured explicitly as teaching. This power of speech allows the Mariner to hold audiences captive, and, we will see, to impart change in their lives.

> 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.

Related Characters: The Ancient Mariner (speaker), The Wedding Guest

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 612-617

Explanation and Analysis

These lines conclude the Mariner's tale; they contain the explicit lesson that he hopes to impart to the Wedding Guest, and the moral of Coleridge's story that (despite the poet's intentions) is difficult to ignore. The Mariner has for the first time acknowledged the wedding ceremony, and the joys therein, but only at the service of saying that devout prayer offers much greater joy.

Here, he explains how to reach the best kind of prayer and spiritual awareness: the best prayers come from those who best love "man and bird and beast." He continues, employing repetition with slight variation, saying that the best prayers come from those who best love "all things both great and small," since God loves us, and God made (and loves) everything. Finally, the Mariner seems to understand the correct (Romantic) approach to nature: all of God's creations on all scales, from birds like the Albatross, to mist, to the vast sun and moon, to the supernatural spirits and beings that interact with and influence the natural world, are deserving of reverence, respect, and pious embrace. Doing so, argues the Mariner, is the best way to connect with and communicate with God.

> The Mariner, whose eye is bright,
> Whose beard with age is hoar,
> Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest
> Turned from the bridegroom's door.
>
> He went like one that hath been stunned,
> And is of sense forlorn:
> A sadder and a wiser man,
> He rose the morrow morn.

Related Characters: The Wedding Guest, The Ancient Mariner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 618-625

Explanation and Analysis

These lines end the poem. The Mariner, despite his age, still has a bright eye, indicative of his ceaseless urge to communicate and tell his story. We can also note that the Wedding Guest turns away from the wedding rather than continuing on to it (as he so fervently wanted to at the start of the poem). This subtle change in his decision and path of the day represents a shift in the journey in his life. The Wedding Guest is "stunned" and is "of a sense forlorn." Such descriptors give evidence that interacting with the ancient man and hearing his wild story of nature and spirits is itself a sublime experience. The Wedding Guest has not seen nature's terrors in the way the Mariner has, but he has heard the story and seen those fierce bright eyes. Thus he becomes "a sadder and a wiser man," and most likely a saved man. The Mariner is not able to ever fully absolve himself, but through the power of his speech, he is given the gift of being able to save other people.

Readers, too, are in a similar state to the Wedding Guest,

since almost immediately after the Mariner's story ends, the poem ends. Having observed the effect words and stories have on the Wedding Guest we then (Coleridge might hope) are more open to the profound effects that poetry can have on us.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART I

The Ancient Mariner, an old man with a grey beard and a "glittering **eye**," stops one out of three young men who are on their way to a wedding. The man whom the Mariner stopped, the Wedding Guest, explains that the wedding is about to start, but the Mariner ignores the wedding guest and begins his tale anyway with the simple line, "There was a ship." The Wedding Guest tries again to get out of hearing the story, but the Mariner holds him spellbound with his eye, his hand, and his powerful storytelling ability. The Wedding Guest is forced to listen to the Mariner's tale.

The poem begins with a description of the Mariner, and immediately attention is drawn to his eyes, and his power to hold the Wedding Guest and force the young man to hear his tale. Here, storytelling needs no introduction, as the Mariner simply starts speaking and begins the story. The false urgency of the wedding is a rather mundane celebration that will pale in comparison to the Mariner's tale, and to a proper Romantic appreciation of the sublime.

The Mariner then launches into the story of his experiences at sea, describing how the ship itself launched into the sea and sailed southward—he indicates the direction by describing the path of the **sun**. When merry sounds are heard from the wedding feast, the Wedding Guest once more tries to escape the Mariner's tale, but he remains enthralled.

The Mariner takes the Wedding Guest and the reader abruptly into the natural world, using the changing position of the sun to show the planet's orientation and vastness at once. With the motif of the wedding, the "mundane" tries to assert itself over the sublimity of nature, but it fails to overpower the story.

After the Wedding Guest quiets down again, the Mariner's story moves on to the great storm, which pushed the ship towards the South Pole. There he and the other Sailors are surrounded by ice, mist, and snow. There is a complete lack of life, but also a sense of the sublime in the vast icebergs and glaciers they pass. The only noise is the haunting sound of ice cracking all around the ship.

The powerful storm and the dangerous beauty of the South Pole exhibit the essence of the Romantic ideal of the sublime. The storm overpowers the ship and forces it to the Pole, where it meets potential peril from the ice. But the mist and snow are also terrifyingly beautiful and majestic.

This silence and lack of life is broken, however, by an **Albatross**, which the crew hails as if it were a Christian, and believes to be a sign of good luck. They feed the bird, which follows them and visits to eat and play, and the Sailors all rejoice at the newly blowing wind (which they attribute to the bird) that allows them to begin heading north again.

Since the Albatross materializes out of the fog in a land where it seems nothing should be able to live, it is seen as both natural and supernatural, and an embodiment of the sublime. For the Sailors, it is a token of good luck and a means of connection with God and the natural world.

But amidst this joyous celebration of the bird, the Wedding Guest suddenly interjects into the story, revealing that while telling this part of his tale the Mariner looks like he is greatly plagued by fiends. The Mariner then shares his tragic mistake and great sin without giving any indication of the reason he did it: with his cross-bow, he shot the **Albatross**.

This unexplained killing sets in motion the cycle of sin and penance the Mariner must undergo. It is first and foremost a crime against the natural world, and thus against God, for which the Mariner will never be fully absolved. Another way to view this attack on the bird is as another failed attempt to assert the mundane over the sublime. With this idea comes the notion that by killing the bird, the Mariner was fulfilling the constant human desire to interpret. The Albatross was once ethereal, natural and supernatural, crossing boundaries and exhibiting qualities of both worlds, but by killing it the Mariner forces a singular interpretation on it: dead. Nature and the supernatural world will then punish the Mariner for his sin and for his misguided effort to interpret a bird that resists interpretation. (Also note that the Albatross is killed by a cross-bow—adding Christ-like imagery to its death.)

PART II

The Mariner says that after he shot the **Albatross**, the ship began sailing northward. While the winds still blow, the Sailors feel the absence of the bird, and they cry out against the Mariner for his hellish deed. But when the mist begins to fade, the Sailors attribute this positive change to the Albatross's death, and they justify the killing and praise the Mariner for what he did, making themselves accomplices to his crime.

The Sailors also feel the need to interpret, and while they do so immediately, they change their minds quite easily. These interpretations—willingness to suggest that humans can control nature, or that killing the Albatross was the right thing to do—are also figured as a sin for which the Sailors are punished.

For a little while the ship sails with a good breeze and without mist, but suddenly, the wind dies down and the sea becomes extremely calm. Below a "hot and copper sky" and "the bloody **Sun**," the Mariner and the Sailors become stranded in the ocean without water. Ironically, they are surrounded by water that they cannot drink, and they become extremely thirsty. Coleridge's annotation here notes that "the **Albatross** begins to be avenged."

Though the Mariner and the Sailors at one point believe good things will come of the Albatross's death, nature, here ruled by the sun (and the Spirit), has other plans. The death of the bird starts to take its toll on the Mariner and the crew, as they begin the slow process of dying of thirst, despite being surrounded by water (and these lines are where the phrase "water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink" comes from). Such a torture is penance for the sins they have committed.

During this period of dryness, completely stuck and increasingly thirsty, the Mariner cries out to Christ in terror afraid of the slimy creatures crawling on the surface of the sea. These strange creatures give way to the realization that an invisible Spirit, a supernatural being responsible for influencing the natural world, has followed them from the Pole and is plaguing the ship.

If approached with the correct Romantic attitude, the "slimy creatures" could be viewed as beautiful. But the Mariner has not yet had his realization, and is in the midst of facing penance at the hand of nature (guided by the Spirit), so he is unable to appreciate God's creatures as is intended.

So thirsty that they cannot speak, the Sailors all give the Mariner evil looks, seeking to "throw the whole guilt" on him for what he did. Thus they decide to hang the body of the dead **Albatross**, in place of a cross, around the Mariner's neck.

Nature and the supernatural forces have robbed the Sailors and the Mariner of their ability to speak, but humans still retain a more primal form of communication: the eyes. On the verge of death, the Sailors communicate their rage and hatred through looks, and hang the Albatross around the Mariner's neck in place of a cross. At this moment, the symbolism of the bird for Christ on the cross is made explicit.

PART III

The Mariner and the Sailors spend a long "weary time" stuck in the state of thirst on the calm sea. But after some time, the Mariner sees a speck approaching in the westward sky. As the speck comes closer and closer, the Mariner begins to recognize what it is. However, neither he nor any other member of the crew can speak (because of their intense thirst), so he has no way of drawing the Sailors' attention to what he sees. To solve this problem, the Mariner explains that he "bit my arm, I sucked my blood, / And cried, A sail! A sail!" With this visceral sacrifice he alerts the Sailors to the approaching ship.

Part of the Mariner's penance is rooted in stillness, isolation, and utter abandonment of hope as time lurches by. This approaching ship (and the revelation of its purpose) gives hope and then dashes it. The ship also appeals to and utilizes the natural urge to tell stories and communicate. Part of the Mariner's penance is undoubtedly the fierce desire to speak and the denial of that ability by nature. In order to communicate again, the Mariner must pay a visceral price: he drinks his own blood to wet his throat. This gruesome detail also functions within a Christian allegorical reading, as Christ's blood has healing powers of salvation, and is drunk (literally or symbolically, depending on the interpretation) in the ritual of the Eucharist.

The Sailors at first take great joy in the Mariner's announcement that another ship is approaching, since they believe that they are going to be saved. But that joy quickly turns to horror, as they begin to question how the ship could possibly be approaching without a breeze or tide. As the ship approaches close it seems to be the skeleton of a ship, creating a "dungeon-grate," barred effect as it passes in front of the red setting **sun**.

This moment is an exhibit of master storytelling, both on the part of Coleridge and the Mariner. Readers are given hope, as a ship approaches and might rescue the Mariner, but that hope is almost immediately crushed as the poet delivers the realization that the ship is in fact a ghostly vessel. Note that the ghost ship is superimposed over the sun and the natural world, as the Mariner's penance transfers into the supernatural realm.

Through the 'ribs' or 'grate' of the skeleton ship, the Mariner perceives its sole passengers: Death himself and Life-in-Death, a woman described with yellow hair, red lips, and haunting white skin. As their ghostly ship comes beside the Mariner's ship, the Mariner notes that Death and Life-in-Death have been playing dice for the crew. Life-in-Death has won the soul of the Mariner.

The introduction of Death and Life-in-Death is one of Coleridge's greatest moves away from Christian tradition and towards the supernatural. The strange in-between nature of Life-in-Death, exhibited in her name and her physical description, is in line with the living death that will become the next step of the Mariner's penance.

After Life-in-Death announces her victory, the **sun** sets and the **moon** rises. In the moonlight, one by one each of the Sailors turns to curse the Mariner with their **eyes**. Then one by one, all two hundred Sailors drop down dead and thump to the deck. Their souls whizz by the Mariner like shots from his cross-bow, but he alone is left alive to face whatever penance is demanded of him in his trials.

In a cyclic transfer of influence, the moon replaces the sun. The torture (thirst) caused by the natural world is brought to its final stage by the supernatural Death under the moon. Still unable to communicate by speech, the Sailors communicate (what should be) their final hatred through their eyes. Note that the fate of the Sailors is one of the aspects that challenges a straightforward Christian allegorical reading of the poem. To where do the Sailors' souls whizz? Why do they die when the Mariner is given a chance at absolution? Is their interpretive sin somehow worse than his? Such complicating questions remain mostly unanswered and open to interpretation.

PART IV

At hearing that all the Sailors died, the Wedding Guest interrupts the story, afraid that the Mariner, too, perished that day and is telling the story as a sort of zombie or ghost. But the Mariner reassures him that his body didn't drop like all the others; he alone remained alive.

Again, the Wedding Guest momentarily draws readers back to civilization, placing greater emphasis on the terror of the sublime experiences the Mariner describes. The Mariner assures the Guest that he himself is still alive, as one of the most important aspects of his journey is that he lives to tell the tale.

As the Mariner returns to his story, this solitude becomes a terrible part of the penance he must pay. Alone on the sea, he feels that he has no pity from saints, and he is caught between the horrifying ocean and the dead bodies that surround him. The Mariner at this moment hates the slimy sea creatures around him, believing it unfair that they should live while the Sailors are dead. In his anguish he looks to heaven, but finds himself unable to pray.

The solitude and stillness the Mariner felt while the Sailors were still alive is compounded and made more extreme. These moments are saturated with horror, and nature seems to the Mariner no more friendly than the corpses at his feet. Again, he cannot recognize the beauty and value of the slimy things that live in the water, and he is rendered unable to pray.

After closing his **eyes** in an attempt to escape his punishment, the Mariner finds that he is still being cursed by the look in the dead men's eyes. He notes that the dead bodies do not decay, and their cursing gaze is held for a week. But even after this week, the Mariner still cannot die.

Eyes offer communication where other forms fail, and their power is such that the Mariner can't even escape his punishment by shutting his eyes; he simply keeps seeing. The power of the dead men's eyes seems to transcend life and death, as they curse him even as corpses.

Following this weeklong dead-**eyed** curse, the Mariner comes to his great realization. In the **moonlight**, while the ship's shadow remains an "awful red," the Mariner watches beautiful water snakes glistening and swimming beside the ship. At their sight he exclaims, "O happy living things!" The Mariner cherishes, praises, and blesses the beauty of these creatures, and as a result he believes his saint begins to take pity on him. Finally, he is able to pray, and at this moment the **Albatross** slips off his neck and into the sea.

In this crucial moment the Mariner is able to reconcile the natural and the supernatural worlds, and recognize them as interrelated, holy expressions of the spiritual. The moonlight, which illuminated much of his penance, now enables him to finally see the once "slimy" water snakes as they were intended: beautiful, happy, created beings. This realization and embrace of the Romantic attitude allows the Mariner to pray, and to be in part absolved of his sin, as the Albatross naturally slips off his neck and returns to the natural world and the mysterious depths of the sea.

PART V

Once he has come to his spiritual realization (that is, has learned to appreciate nature) and been opened back up to prayer, the Mariner is then able to fall asleep. In this sleep he dreams of rain, and he soon awakes to find his dream realized. He drinks and drinks, momentarily at ease and satisfied.

The Mariner's spiritual awakening has, for a time, lifted the curse and penance he must undergo. After being denied water and sleep, he is finally able to rest, recover, and drink.

But soon after drinking, the Mariner notices the wind begin to rage and nature and supernatural spirits begin to act out. The **moon** is in the sky and a huge black cloud pours out rain; the natural world is in commotion.

This recovery period, it seems, only served to energize the Mariner for the continued penance that will follow. Once more, the natural world enters a state of chaos, as supernatural and natural forces coincide in another sublime storm.

This commotion, however, does not reach the ship, which instead is subject to a supernatural phenomenon. The dead Sailors groan, rise up, and, without speaking or moving their **eyes**, begin working on the ship. Even without wind, the ghastly crew is able to sail the ship. The Wedding Guest reacts to this detail in horror, but the Mariner assures him that it was not demons that reanimated the corpses, or the original souls returning. Instead, the bodies (and the ship) were piloted by a troop of angels.

While the natural storm rages, an eerie (later revealed to be divine) occurrence takes place on the ship. The natural and the supernatural, angels and spirits, terror and awe within the context of the sublime, all become mixed together. This conflation of influences is essential to the realization that everything, despite the seeming categories, falls under the umbrella of God's creation, and is deserving of adoration and celebration.

The Mariner then describes how when the night ended and the **sun** rose, the angels too rose out of the bodies of the Sailors and flew around, singing like birds and playing in a heavenly choir. When the song stops, the ship continues to sail onward without a breeze, as the Lonesome Spirit from the South Pole, under instruction from the angels, is carrying the ship homeward.

The end of night in part symbolizes a transition away from the supernatural, as the angels leave the Sailors' bodies and offer a divine celebration. But the Lonesome Spirit continues to carry the ship, under the influence of the angels. Again, we see the supernatural and the natural tied together under the influence of the spiritual.

Suddenly, the Mariner is thrown into a fit, and in that strange state he hears two voices (the First Voice and Second Voice) beginning to converse. The voices clarify with one another that the Mariner is indeed the man who shot the **Albatross**, the bird that was much beloved by the Spirit from the pole. One voice then responds to the other, "The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do."

This fit of the Mariner's is strange, in that it comes in the same section that he dreams, but is separated as a different kind of experience. The fit seems to be a combination of a supernatural state and a spiritual vision, in which the state of his redemption is revealed to the Mariner. As the Voices (who seem to be spirits of some kind) indicate, he has done penance, but still more is required of the Mariner. This proves to be the case for him in perpetuity; there is always still more penance, an idea which challenges the common Christian narrative of sin, penance, redemption, and salvation.

PART VI

The First Voice and Second Voice briefly continue their conversation, explaining that the **moon** and sea are working together to navigate and transport the ship. They then fly away, indicating that the ship will slow again once the Mariner awakens from his trance.

Again, we see influences (moon, sea, the Spirit) working together under a divine plan to aid in the Mariner's journey and penance.

Upon their departure, the Mariner wakes under the **moonlit** sky beside the dead Sailors. For a moment, his penance and the dead-**eyed** curse returns, and the Mariner becomes unable to pray. But just as soon as it returns, the spell is broken again. Thoughtfully, the Mariner observes nature and the sea as a fair breeze begins to blow.

As indicated by the voices, the Mariner must face more penance and horrors. Again, he loses his ability to pray and communicate with God. This curse and lapse of communication is healed once more through the eyes and an observation of nature's beauty.

This breeze moves the ship swiftly and sweetly, until the Mariner cries out with joy: he has been brought home to his native land. At this sight he weeps and prays to God that he isn't dreaming and truly has returned home. Still in **moonlight**, and now in the beautiful familiarity of his home bay, the Mariner sees the angels leaving the souls of the dead Sailors for good. Rather than singing, he notes that the angels simply wave and offer a profound, meaningful silence, a type of music in its own right.

After the Mariner's dream and strange fit, it makes sense that in the joyous sight of his homeland, he prays to God that it's really happening. The end of the supernatural possession of the Sailors makes way for a divine experience. When the angels leave the bodies we can note that instead of singing in a choir as they have before, here they communicate only visually, as a spectacle.

But this silent music is broken by the sound of oars, as the Mariner hears and then sees a small boat carrying a Pilot, a Pilot's Boy, and a Hermit. The Mariner determines the Hermit to be a man of God, and decides that the Hermit will be able to absolve him of his sin, "shrieve" (free from guilt) his soul, and wash away the **Albatross**'s blood.

Just as cracking ice and the entry of the Albatross breaks the sublime, pristine quiet of the South Pole, oars disrupt the silent angel music—a sign that there is still pressure on the Mariner to survive, to struggle, and to absolve himself of his crime.

PART VII

The Mariner begins the final part of his tale by describing the Hermit, a pious man who "rears" his "sweet voice" from the small boat approaching the ship. The Mariner then describes the conversation between the Hermit and the Pilot, which he overheard as they approached his ship with wonder. The two men view the skeletal ship much in the same way that the Mariner and the Sailors first viewed the ship of Death and Life-in-Death. Undeterred, the small boat continues to approach.

The Hermit presents an alternate view of a Christian. Rather than requiring an undertaking of sin and penance, the Hermit is simply a pious man who presents the Mariner with an opportunity to gain absolution. The Hermit and Pilot are also new voices and new characters in a narrative that has mostly contained only the Mariner's voice alone.

Suddenly, the Mariner's ship begins to sink. The water rumbles and whirls and the ship goes down like lead, but the Mariner is saved in the Pilot's boat. When the boat begins spinning in the whirlpool caused by the sinking ship, the Mariner begins to speak, causing the Pilot, the Pilot's Boy, and the Hermit to fall into fits and go crazy, since they believed the Mariner to be dead. When the Mariner takes the oars from the boy and saves his own saviors, the Pilot's Boy remarks that he now knows "The Devil knows how to row."

The sinking ship provides the final test from nature to the Mariner. Throughout his journey on the ocean he was separated from the natural world, protected by the ship. Facing the peril of being swallowed up by the sea and nature itself, the Mariner by now has learned to accept his fate. He seeks closeness to nature, and were it not for the Pilot and the Hermit, the Mariner would have likely drowned.

Once upon land, the Mariner throws himself at the Hermit and begs for forgiveness and absolution. When the confused Hermit asked him to explain, the Mariner gives the first retelling of his story. Since then, he explains, at random hours "agony returns," and until he tells his story once again, his heart burns. The Mariner says that he passes from land to land using his "strange power of speech," always knowing by the face which man he must teach with his tale.

Having survived his final physical task, the Mariner now turns to complete his spiritual journey. Here he first comes into his role of storyteller, which ends up becoming his perpetual state. His urge to tell stories and to save others parallels the poet's own need to communicate and teach lessons. This cycle of agony and retelling mirrors and replaces the cycle of sin and penance for the Mariner, which has reached as much of a conclusion and absolution as he will be granted. This idea of perpetual penance is a break from traditional Christian allegories, in which the sinner is fully absolved and saved.

At this point, the Mariner refers for the first time to the wedding that has been looming for the entire poem. He hears an outburst from the wedding and claims that he is being called to prayer. However, he also uses the outburst to provide the Wedding Guest with his final, most overt lessons. Much sweeter than a wedding feast, says the Mariner, is gathering for prayer. His final words are a lesson in optimizing prayer: "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast. / He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small," since God loves us, and God made them all.

The Mariner invokes the mundane at the service of showing how much higher the sublime should be valued. He teaches his final lesson explicitly here: the best way to connect with God and the spiritual world is through the natural world and an appreciation of creation in its entirety and variety. Spirituality, argues the Mariner, is to be valued above all else, and the highest form of spirituality is through a Romantic engagement with nature. Note also that the Mariner ends his story with this overt lesson, and that soon after the poem ends. The poet's urge, much like the Mariner's, has been satisfied for the time being.

His tale finished, the Mariner leaves, and the Wedding Guest turns away from the wedding feast. The poem ends with the assertion that the Wedding Guest, now forlorn, has become "a sadder and a wiser man" as a result of the Mariner's story.

The final lines of the poem are an important assertion of the power that storytelling has to affect change. Evidenced by the Wedding Guest's transformation into a sadder and wiser person (and his turning away from the wedding he had previously been so eager to attend), stories have the power to guide individuals spiritually and help them reach the understanding required of salvation.

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