

## The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1772-1834

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### Before you Read

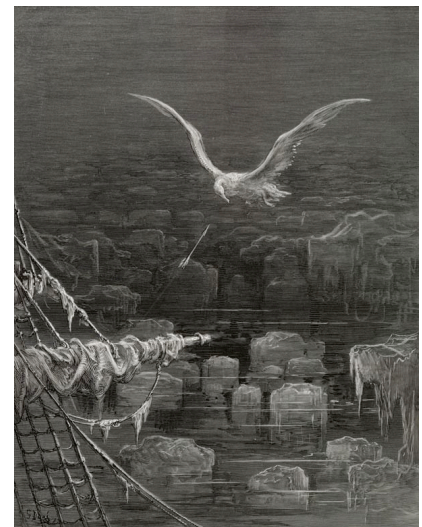
**Make the Connection – Crime and Confession:** Have you ever done something on impulse, knowing that even while you were doing it that you would regret it forever? The Ancient Mariner's strange tale turns on just such an action. And the dreadful consequences of his impulsive deed are as hypnotizing to us as they are to the Mariner's spellbound listener. As you read, pay attention to your own responses to the Mariner's story. When do you feel sympathy for the Mariner – or sorrow or horror or fear? When do you feel his story is true, and when is it hopelessly distorted by his own guilt?

**Elements of Literature – The Literary Ballad:** A **literary ballad**, a songlike poem that tells a story, is written in imitation of the folk ballad, which springs from a genuine oral tradition. Coleridge's literary ballad imitates the traditional **folk ballad** in both subject matter and form. Like the old folk ballads, his sensational narrative blends real with supernatural events. Coleridge was a skilled poet, and to avoid monotony, he often varies his **meter** and **rhyme scheme**. He also uses sophisticated sound devices like **internal rhyme** ("The guests are met, the feast is set") and **assonance** ("Tis sweeter far to me"). To give his ballad an archaic sound, he uses language that was even old-fashioned in his own time.

**Background:** Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as part of the collaboration with Wordsworth in 1797-1798 that culminated in *Lyrical Ballads*. Twenty years later, in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge recalled that he and Wordsworth made a poetic division of labor based on their interest in the two powers of poetry: (1) to represent ordinary events and objects in an unfamiliar way so as to make them fresh and interesting and (2) to make believable the unfamiliar and strange.

Coleridge's task was to write about "persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so far as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." "With this view," he said, "I wrote the Ancient Mariner." The poem was the first item in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. But partly because of Wordsworth's discomfort with the incongruity between it and the rest of the poems in the volume, Coleridge modernized many of the deliberately old-fashioned words he had used. The marginal notes were added in 1817 and need to be viewed as "modern" and rational comments on the Mariner's tale.

Coleridge's poem no doubt reflects his avid reading of travelers' accounts of strange lands. It was apparently Wordsworth who suggested the use of the albatross. It is helpful in reading this hypnotic narrative to keep in mind three things. First, there is no explanation for the killing of the albatross. Second, the moral of the story, pronounced by the Mariner at the end, is, as Coleridge later observed, too much and too little; that is, it is too obtrusive and yet not adequate. Finally, the poem must be seen in the light of Coleridge's own more settled religious convictions, which contrast with the spiritual despair of the Mariner: "Alone on a wide wide sea; / So lonely 'twas, that God himself / Scarce seemed there to be."



Argument

How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by storms to the cold Country toward the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancient Mariner came back to his own Country.

**PART I**

An ancient Mariner meeteth three gallants bidden to a wedding feast, and detaineth one.	IT is an ancient Mariner, And he stoppeth one of three. 'By thy long beard and glittering eye, Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?	The land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen.	And through the drifts the snowy cliffs Did send a dismal sheen: Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken— The ice was all between.	55
	The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide, And I am next of kin; The guests are met, the feast is set: May'st hear the merry din.'	5	The ice was here, the ice was there, The ice was all around: It crack'd and growl'd, and roar'd and howl'd, Like noises in a swound!	60
	He holds him with his skinny hand, 'There was a ship,' quoth he. 'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon! Eftsoons his hand dropt he.	10	At length did cross an Albatross, Thorough the fog it came; As if it had been a Christian soul, We hail'd it in God's name.	65
The Wedding-Guest is spell-bound by the eye of the old seafaring man, and constrained to hear his tale.	He holds him with his glittering eye— The Wedding-Guest stood still, And listens like a three years' child: The Mariner hath his will.	15	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 steer'd us through!	70
	The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone: He cannot choose but hear; And thus spake on that ancient man, The bright-eyed Mariner.	20	And a good south wind sprung up behind; The Albatross did follow, And every day, for food or play, Came to the mariners' hollo!	
	'The ship was cheer'd, the harbour clear'd, Merrily did we drop Below the kirk, below the hill, Below the lighthouse top.		In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud, It perch'd for vespers nine; Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white, Glimmer'd the white moonshine.'	75
The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the Line.	The Sun came up upon the left, Out of the sea came he! And he shone bright, and on the right Went down into the sea.	25	The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.	80
	Higher and higher every day, Till over the mast at noon——' The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast, For he heard the loud bassoon.	30	<b>PART II</b>	
	The bride hath paced into the hall, Red as a rose is she; Nodding their heads before her goes The merry minstrelsy.	35	'The Sun now rose upon the right: Out of the sea came he, Still hid in mist, and on the left Went down into the sea.	85
The Wedding-Guest heareth the bridal music; but the Mariner continueth his tale.	The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast, Yet he cannot choose but hear; And thus spake on that ancient man, The bright-eyed Mariner.	40	And the good south wind still blew behind, But no sweet bird did follow, Nor any day for food or play Came to the mariners' hollo!	90
The ship drawn by a storm toward the South Pole.	'And now the Storm-blast came, and he Was tyrannous and strong: He struck with his o'ertaking wings, And chased us south along.	45	And I had done an hellish thing, And it would work 'em woe: For all averr'd, I had kill'd the bird That made the breeze to blow. Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, That made the breeze to blow!	95
	With sloping masts and dipping prow, As who pursued with yell and blow Still treads the shadow of his foe, And forward bends his head, The ship drove fast, loud roar'd the blast, The southward aye we fled.	50	Nor dim nor red, like God's own head, The glorious Sun uprist: Then all averr'd, I had kill'd the bird That brought the fog and mist. 'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, That bring the fog and mist.	100
	And now there came both mist and snow, And it grew wondrous cold: And ice, mast-high, came floating by, As green as emerald.	50	The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew, The furrow follow'd free; We were the first that ever burst Into that silent sea.	105

The ship hath been suddenly becalmed.	Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down, 'Twas sad as sad could be; And we did speak only to break The silence of the sea!		As if it dodged a water-sprite, It plunged, and tack'd, and veer'd.	155
	All in a hot and copper sky, The bloody Sun, at noon, Right up above the mast did stand, No bigger than the Moon.	110 At its nearer approach, it seemeth him to be a ship; and at a dear ransom he freeth his speech from the bonds of thirst.	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 suck'd the blood, And cried, A sail! a sail!	160
	Day after day, day after day, We stuck, nor breath nor motion; As idle as a painted ship Upon a painted ocean.	115 A flash of joy;	With throats unslaked, with black lips baked, Agape they heard me call: Gramercy! they for joy did grin, And all at once their breath drew in, As they were drinking all.	165
And the Albatross begins to be avenged.	Water, water, everywhere, And all the boards did shrink; Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink.	120 And horror follows. For can it be a ship that comes onward without wind or tide?	See! see! (I cried) she tacks no more! Hither to work us weal— Without a breeze, without a tide, She steadies with upright keel!	170
	The very deep did rot: O Christ! That ever this should be! Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs Upon the slimy sea.	125	The western wave was all aflame, The day was wellnigh done! Almost upon the western wave Rested the broad, bright Sun; When that strange shape drove suddenly Betwixt us and the Sun.	175
	About, about, in reel and rout The death-fires danced at night; The water, like a witch's oils, Burnt green, and blue, and white.	130 It seemeth him but the skeleton of a ship.	And straight the Sun was fleck'd with bars (Heaven's Mother send us grace!), As if through a dungeon-grate he peer'd With broad and burning face.	180
A Spirit had followed them; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more. The shipmates in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner: in sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck.	And some in dreams assuréd were Of the Spirit that plagued us so; Nine fathom deep he had followed us From the land of mist and snow.	135	Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud) How fast she nears and nears! Are those her sails that glance in the Sun, Like restless gossameres?	185
	And every tongue, through utter drought, Was wither'd at the root; We could not speak, no more than if We had been choked with soot.	And its ribs are seen as bars on the face of the setting Sun. The Spectre-Woman and her Death-mate, and no other on board the skeleton ship. Like vessel, like crew!	Are those her ribs through which the Sun Did peer, as through a grate? And is that Woman all her crew? Is that a Death? and are there two? Is Death that Woman's mate?	190
	Ah! well a-day! what evil looks Had I from old and young! Instead of the cross, the Albatross About my neck was hung.	140 Death and Life-in-Death have dived for the ship's crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner. No twilight within the courts of the Sun.	The naked hulk alongside came, And the twain were casting dice; "The game is done! I've won! I've won!" Quoth she, and whistles thrice.	195
The ancient Mariner beholdeth a sign in the element afar off.	<b>PART III</b> 'There passed a weary time. Each throat Was parch'd, and glazed each eye. A weary time! a weary time! How glazed each weary eye! When looking westward, I beheld A something in the sky.	145	The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out: At one stride comes the dark; With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea, Off shot the spectre-bark.	200
	At first it seem'd a little speck, And then it seem'd a mist; It moved and moved, and took at last A certain shape, I wist.	150	We listen'd and look'd sideways up! Fear at my heart, as at a cup, My life-blood seem'd to sip! The stars were dim, and thick the night, The steersman's face by his lamp gleam'd white; From the sails the dew did drip— Till clomb above the eastern bar The hornéd Moon, with one bright star Within the nether tip.	205
	A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist! And still it near'd and near'd:	At the rising of the Moon,		210

One after another,	One after one, by the star-dogg'd Moon, Too quick for groan or sigh, Each turn'd his face with a ghastly pang, And cursed me with his eye.	215	sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected, and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.	Like April hoar-frost spread; But where the ship's huge shadow lay, The charm'd water burnt away A still and awful red.	270
His shipmates drop down dead.	Four times fifty living men (And I heard nor sigh nor groan), With heavy thump, a lifeless lump, They dropp'd down one by one.	220			
But Life-in-Death begins her work on the ancient Mariner.	The souls did from their bodies fly— They fled to bliss or woe! And every soul, it pass'd me by Like the whizz of my crossbow!				
<b>PART IV</b>					
The Wedding-Guest feareth that a spirit is talking to him;	'I fear thee, ancient Mariner! I fear thy skinny hand! And thou art long, and lank, and brown, As is the ribb'd sea-sand.	225	By the light of the Moon he beholdeth God's creatures of the great calm.	Beyond the shadow of the ship, I watch'd the water-snakes: They moved in tracks of shining white, And when they rear'd, the elfish light Fell off in hoary flakes.	275
But the ancient Mariner assureth him of his bodily life, and proceedeth to relate his horrible penance.	I fear thee and thy glittering eye, And thy skinny hand so brown.'— 'Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest! This body dropt not down.	230		Within the shadow of the ship I watch'd their rich attire: Blue, glossy green, and velvet black, They coil'd and swam; and every track Was a flash of golden fire.	280
He despiseth the creatures of the calm.	Alone, alone, all, all alone, Alone on a wide, wide sea! And never a saint took pity on My soul in agony.	235	Their beauty and their happiness.	O happy living things! no tongue Their beauty might declare: A spring of love gush'd from my heart, And I bless'd them unaware: Sure my kind saint took pity on me, And I bless'd them unaware.	285
And envieth that they should live, and so many lie dead.	The many men, so beautiful! And they all dead did lie: And a thousand thousand slimy things Lived on; and so did I.	240	He blesseth them in his heart.		
	I look'd upon the rotting sea, And drew my eyes away; I look'd upon the rotting deck, And there the dead men lay.		The spell begins to break.	The selfsame moment I could pray; And from my neck so free The Albatross fell off, and sank Like lead into the sea.	290
	I look'd to heaven, and tried to pray; But or ever a prayer had gusht, A wicked whisper came, and made My heart as dry as dust.	245		<b>PART V</b>	
	I closed my lids, and kept them close, And the balls like pulses beat; For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky, Lay like a load on my weary eye, And the dead were at my feet.	250	By grace of the holy Mother, the ancient Mariner is refreshed with rain.	'O sleep! it is a gentle thing, Beloved from pole to pole! To Mary Queen the praise be given! She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven, That slid into my soul.	295
But the curse liveth for him in the eye of the dead men.	The cold sweat melted from their limbs, Nor rot nor reek did they: The look with which they look'd on me Had never pass'd away.	255		The silly buckets on the deck, That had so long remain'd, I dreamt that they were fill'd with dew; And when I awoke, it rain'd.	300
	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.	260		My lips were wet, my throat was cold, My garments all were dank; Sure I had drunken in my dreams, And still my body drank.	305
In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still	The moving Moon went up the sky, And nowhere did abide; Softly she was going up, And a star or two beside—  Her beams bemoock'd the sultry main,	265	He heareth sounds and seeth strange sights and commotions in the sky and the element.	I moved, and could not feel my limbs: I was so light—almost I thought that I had died in sleep, And was a bless'd ghost.  And soon I heard a roaring wind: It did not come anear; But with its sound it shook the sails, That were so thin and sere.	310
				The upper air burst into life; And a hundred fire-flags sheen; To and fro they were hurried about! And to and fro, and in and out,	315



		of light.	I turn'd my eyes upon the deck— O Christ! what saw I there!	
The supernatural motion is retarded; the Mariner awakes, and his penance begins anew.	I woke, and we were sailing on As in a gentle weather: 'Twas night, calm night, the Moon was high; The dead men stood together.		Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat, And, by the holy rood!	490
	All stood together on the deck, For a charnel-dungeon fitter: All fix'd on me their stony eyes, That in the Moon did glitter.	435	A man all light, a seraph-man, On every corse there stood.	
	The pang, the curse, with which they died, Had never pass'd away: I could not draw my eyes from theirs, Nor turn them up to pray.	440	This seraph-band, each waved his hand: It was a heavenly sight! They stood as signals to the land, Each one a lovely light;	495
The curse is finally expiated.	And now this spell was snapt: once more I viewed the ocean green, And look'd far forth, yet little saw Of what had else been seen—	445	This seraph-band, each waved his hand, No voice did they impart— No voice; but O, the silence sank Like music on my heart.	500
	Like one that on a lonesome road Doth walk in fear and dread, And having once turn'd round, walks on, And turns no more his head; Because he knows a frightful fiend Doth close behind him tread.	450	But soon I heard the dash of oars, I heard the Pilot's cheer; My head was turn'd perforce away, And I saw a boat appear.	
	But soon there breathed a wind on me, Nor sound nor motion made: Its path was not upon the sea, In ripple or in shade.	455	The Pilot and the Pilot's boy, I heard them coming fast: Dear Lord in Heaven! it was a joy The dead men could not blast.	505
	It raised my hair, it fann'd my cheek Like a meadow-gale of spring— It mingled strangely with my fears, Yet it felt like a welcoming.	460	I saw a third—I heard his voice: It is the Hermit good! He singeth loud his godly hymns That he makes in the wood. He'll shrive my soul, he'll wash away The Albatross's blood.	510
	Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship, Yet she sail'd softly too: Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze— On me alone it blew.	460	<b>PART VII</b> The Hermit of the Wood. 'This Hermit good lives in that wood Which slopes down to the sea. How loudly his sweet voice he rears! He loves to talk with marineres That come from a far countree.	515
And the ancient Mariner beholdeth his native country.	O dream of joy! is this indeed The lighthouse top I see? Is this the hill? is this the kirk? Is this mine own countree?	465	He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve— He hath a cushion plump: It is the moss that wholly hides The rotted old oak-stump.	520
	We drifted o'er the harbour-bar, And I with sobs did pray— O let me be awake, my God! Or let me sleep alway.	470	The skiff-boat near'd: I heard them talk, "Why, this is strange, I trow! Where are those lights so many and fair, That signal made but now?"	525
	The harbour-bay was clear as glass, So smoothly it was strewn! And on the bay the moonlight lay, And the shadow of the Moon.	475	"Strange, by my faith!" the Hermit said— "And they answer'd not our cheer! The planks looked warp'd! and see those sails, How thin they are and sere! I never saw aught like to them, Unless perchance it were	530
	The rock shone bright, the kirk no less That stands above the rock: The moonlight steep'd in silentness The steady weathercock.	480	Brown skeletons of leaves that lag My forest-brook along; When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow, And the owl whoops to the wolf below, That eats the she-wolf's young."	535
The angelic spirits leave the dead bodies,	And the bay was white with silent light Till rising from the same, Full many shapes, that shadows were, In crimson colours came.		"Dear Lord! it hath a fiendish look— (The Pilot made reply) I am a-fear'd"—"Push on, push on!" Said the Hermit cheerily.	540
And appear in their own forms	A little distance from the prow Those crimson shadows were:	485		

	The boat came closer to the ship, But I nor spake nor stirr'd; The boat came close beneath the ship, And straight a sound was heard.	545	his future life an agony constraineth him to travel from land to land;	And till my ghastly tale is told, This heart within me burns.	585
The ship suddenly sinketh.	Under the water it rumbled on, Still louder and more dread: It reach'd the ship, it split the bay; The ship went down like lead.	550		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.	590
The ancient Mariner is saved in the Pilot's boat.	Stunn'd by that loud and dreadful sound, Which sky and ocean smote, Like one that hath been seven days drown'd My body lay afloat; But swift as dreams, myself I found Within the Pilot's boat.	555		What loud uproar bursts from that door! The wedding-guests are there: But in the garden-bower the bride And bride-maids singing are: And hark the little vesper bell, Which biddeth me to prayer!	595
	Upon the whirl, where sank the ship, The boat spun round and round; And all was still, save that the hill Was telling of the sound.	560		O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been Alone on a wide, wide sea: So lonely 'twas, that God Himself Scarce seeméd there to be.	600
	I moved my lips—the Pilot shriek'd And fell down in a fit; The holy Hermit raised his eyes, And pray'd where he did sit.	565		O sweeter than the marriage-feast, 'Tis sweeter far to me, To walk together to the kirk With a goodly company!—	605
	I took the oars: the Pilot's boy, Who now doth crazy go, Laugh'd loud and long, and all the while His eyes went to and fro. "Ha! ha!" quoth he, "full plain I see The Devil knows how to row."	570	And to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth.	To walk together to the kirk, And all together pray, While each to his great Father bends, Old men, and babes, and loving friends, And youths and maidens gay!	610
	And now, all in my own countree, I stood on the firm land! The Hermit stepp'd forth from the boat, And scarcely he could stand.	575		Farewell, farewell! but this I tell To thee, thou Wedding-Guest! He prayeth well, who loveth well Both man and bird and beast.	615
The ancient Mariner earnestly entreateth the Hermit to shrieve him; and the penance of life falls on him.	"O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!" The Hermit cross'd his brow. "Say quick," quoth he, "I bid thee say— What manner of man art thou?"	580		He prayeth best, who loveth best All things both great and small; For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all.'	620
	Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd With a woful agony, Which forced me to begin my tale; And then it left me free.			The Mariner, whose eye is bright, Whose beard with age is hoar, Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest Turn'd from the bridegroom's door.	
And ever and anon throughout	Since then, at an uncertain hour, That agony returns:			He went like one that hath been stunn'd, And is of sense forlorn: A sadder and a wiser man He rose the morrow morn.	625