Thematic Analysis of
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Written in 1797 and first published in 1798, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" has been interpreted as both a tale of the supernatural, in the Gothic tradition of superstition, magic spells, gloomy atmosphere, and treacherous journeys, and a religious allegory, a morality story embedded within the tale of the Mariner's fate after killing a divine bird. However, the circumstances behind the creation of this fantastic tale were actually quite mundane; one of Coleridge's primary motivations for writing the poem was to raise money for a walking tour that had already begun.

On November 13, 1797, Coleridge and Wordsworth (and Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy) had set out from Alfoxden, headed toward Watchet, a quaint old port not far from Bristol. As the evening drew on, Coleridge and Wordsworth began to plan a way to defer the costs of the tour they had already embarked upon; they decided to write a Gothic ballad, a type of poetry Coleridge remembered from his childhood. Gothic ballads were short yet highly dramatic poems that originated in the oral folk tradition, and they were much in vogue during the 1790s. Coleridge and Wordsworth planned to publish their creation in the *Monthly Magazine.* As a result, Coleridge created "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." When finished, it proved to be far more complex than the Gothic tradition which so heavily influenced it; what's more, it was also a "modern" revision of the medieval allegory to which it bears striking resemblance.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is Coleridge's retelling of a strange dream of John Cruikshank, one of his neighbors in Nether Stowey. Cruikshank dreamed of a skeleton ship, and Coleridge embellished the dream to include the mortal sin of an old navigator, the punishment that ensued, and the navigator's eventual atonement for his sinful act. Although the poem was originally planned as a joint literary effort by Wordsworth and Coleridge (and it was eventually included in their collaborative work, the *Lyrical Ballads,* first published in 1798), the poem is essentially Coleridge's. A few details, however, are attributed to William Wordsworth, such as the ship navigated by the dead sailors who surround the Mariner. Wordsworth also contributed

one of the poem's central events, the haunting of a ship's officer who had shot an albatross. (Wordsworth had happened across this detail in Captain George Shelvocke's *Voyage Round the World by the Way of the Great South Sea* [1726].)

Part 1 of "The Ancient Mariner" introduces many of the themes that are explored throughout the poem. In the first stanza an ancient Mariner with "a long gray beard and glittering eye" intrudes upon a wedding guest and prevents him from joining the marriage celebration. In his detention of the guest, the old Mariner is interfering with one of the sacraments, a formal religious act attesting to one's faith and adherence to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, there are three wedding guests, but only one is stopped, and though he asks, "Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?" neither he nor the reader is ever told why. We can only surmise that this frail old sailor with his "skinny hand" and "glittering eye" has either some supernatural, hypnotic effect (known as mesmerism in Coleridge's time) or that he functions as a spiritual messenger whose powers are beyond mortal explanation. "He holds him with his glittering eye— / The Wedding-Guest stood still, / And listens like a three years' child: / The Mariner hath his will." And though we are told that "the ship was cheered" and that the bride is "[r]ed as a rose," the atmosphere on deck becomes increasingly sinister. The Mariner is absolutely intent on describing the dire events that lead to his terrible punishment, and the Wedding-Guest "cannot choose but hear."

By the end of Part 1 the sacred nature of the albatross is established, "[a]s if it had been a Christian soul." The bird also participates in religious devotions; for instance it observes the canonical hours, as "it perched for vespers nine." But the Mariner's profane impulses kill this sacred messenger, and by giving in to those impulses, the Mariner violates a social code (prevalent in medieval literature) that required a benign stranger be offered hospitality and warm welcome. (The albatross, though unfamiliar with the customs of the ship, "ate the food it ne'er had eat," dutifully returned every day, despite "mist or cloud, on mast or shroud.")

In **Part 2**, we get a detailed description of the landscape and the climate of the Mariner's imagination after he killed the sacred bird. The sea is gloomy and difficult to navigate, "[s]till hid in mist," and

though "the good south wind still blew behind," moving the ship to an undisclosed destination, our sense of foreboding grows as we read "no sweet bird did follow." The other sailors become like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, commenting on the Mariner's guilty conscience. "For all averred, I had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow."

In the absence of the sacred bird, the environment, as described by the Mariner, becomes a vision of hell, with the inversion of the natural phenomena, "[t]he bloody Sun, at noon," and a retrogression to a prehistoric time where "slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea." The ship is left with only the tormenting memory of the sustenance the sea had once provided; while still alive, the Mariner experiences the state of death, where everything is devoid of motion and vitality. One of the most memorable images of this life-in-death is the often quoted description of a paralyzed ocean: "Day after day, day after day, / We stick, nor breath nor motion; / As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean." The oppressive background gives way to superstition, including a reference to St. Elmo's fire, an atmospheric electricity seen on a ship's mast and believed by some to predict disaster. "About, about, in reel and rout / the death-fires danced at night."

In **Part 3**, the sense of deprivation intensifies as the senses are assaulted and basic human needs are denied. Time itself seems merciless and tyrannical, offering neither hope nor end to the suffering. "There passed a weary time. Each throat / Was parched, and glazed each eye. / A weary time! A weary time!" The images of hell accelerate and increase as do the nightmarish visions of preternatural spirits that cannot be seen but nevertheless wreak untold violence for the killing of the sacred albatross. Coleridge builds a "poetic" collaboration between a distorted natural world and a vengeance-seeking spiritual world. "With throats unslaked, with black lips baked, / We could nor laugh nor wail; / Through utter drought all dumb we stood." Further on, the avenging spirits assume a frightening materiality as Death makes herself known: "Are those *her* ribs through which the Sun / Did peer, as through a grate? / and is that Woman all her crew? . . . Is DEATH that woman's mate? . . . The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she." Death has won the game with the mariners and her fearful price is that all the sailors must die,

"[f]our times fifty living men, (And I heard nor sigh nor groan) . . . They dropped down one by one," leaving the Mariner completely alone and isolated.

Part 4 brings us back to the detained Wedding-Guest who has been paralyzed by the frail but powerful old sailor. The Mariner exercises absolute emotional and physical control over the unwilling guest, who says, "'I fear thee, ancient Mariner! / I fear thy skinny hand!'" The Mariner addresses the Wedding-Guest's terrible anxiety with a subtle, yet-unexplained response: all will somehow turn out well in the end because he, the Mariner, is still alive. "Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest! / This body dropped not down." The Mariner continues with his tale of how he, the sole survivor of a mortal sin brought on by his own hand, lived through his hell on earth while surrounded by death and destruction. "The many men, so beautiful! / And they all dead did lie: / And a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I."

Something crucial happens at the end of this section; the Mariner begins to undergo a spiritual rebirth, signaled by a transformation in his understanding of the terrors he has been forced to endure. While watching the snakes and other creatures beyond the shadow of the ship, where light and vision are possible, the Mariner reflects how joyful these creatures seem in their celebration of life. "O happy living things! no tongue / Their beauty might declare / A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware." Though he is not yet conscious of his own spiritual awakening, his expression of love begins his journey toward the expiation of sin and eventual salvation. (This same spiritual awakening, as we will see, is completely absent in "Christabel.")

Part 5 continues the process of spiritual renewal. The Mariner becomes less conscious of his own physical, material being as he begins to see his own soul. At one point, he says he has lost all sensation; he moves without feeling, another life-in-death experience: "I moved, and could not feel my limbs: / I was so light." The experience intensifies as Nature participates by demonstrating a frenetic energy: "The upper air burst into life! . . . And to and fro, and in and out, / The wan stars danced between." This motion inexplicably does not move the ship, and yet it propels it nevertheless. In a similar fashion, the dead sailors on deck begin to groan without speaking as they move their lifeless limbs, becoming

animated corpses. “They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose; / Nor spake, nor moved their eyes; / It had been strange, even in a dream, / To have seen those dead men rise.” The dead sailors assume their former functions on board the ship, “a ghastly crew.”

This weird description makes the Wedding Guest anxious, and he interrupts the Mariner. The Mariner assures him that the quasi-resurrected crew do not return in pain and anguish—only their souls have returned and they are “[b]ut a troop of spirits blest,” now able to sing heavenly songs rather than the common language of mortal man. “And now ’twas like all instruments, / Now like a lonely flute; / And now it is an angel’s song, / That makes the heavens be mute.” Coleridge’s imagery of the animated corpse is not simply a supernatural element but, rather, reflects the poet’s interest in the scientific and pseudo-scientific issues of the late 18th century. He was influenced by the work on electricity and magnetism of Joseph Priestley, a scientist and radical reformer who shared many of the same political beliefs with the young poet.

A little further on, when the Mariner falls into a swoon, yet another version of a life-in-death experience, he hears two voices in the air speaking to one another, wondering if he is the one who “laid full low / The harmless Albatross.” Once the voices have correctly identified the Mariner, they agree that though he has already paid for his terrible crime, he needs to expiate his sin more fully. “The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do.”

Part 6 continues with the Mariner still under a spell, having fallen down by some invisible power that causes him to jerk back and forth. His condition resembles a religious trance, a state where one forgets the body and is instead transported into a spiritual realm. Meanwhile, the dialogue between the two voices continues. The first voice inquires about the strange force that mysteriously moves the ship, to which the second voice responds that it is propelled from beneath, then quickly advises the first spirit to move quickly before the Mariner awakens. “Fly, brother, fly! more high, more high! . . . For slow and slow that ship will go, / When the Mariner’s trance is abated.”

When the Mariner awakens, he is confronted with the sight of the dead men, gathered together in a collective stare from which he cannot turn away. The sight is but a spell and quickly vanishes,

leaving the Mariner fearful of the next vision he may be compelled to witness. "Like one, that on a lonesome road / Doth in fear and dread . . . Because he knows, a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread."

However, his fear is soon transformed into joy; that change is signaled by the wind, which for the romantic poets always meant spirit. The wind is a benign and healing presence: "It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek / Like a meadow-gale of spring." That healing presence continues to manifest itself as the Mariner becomes aware of celestial beings, the highest ranking angels in heaven, on board the ship. "The seraph band, each waved his hand: / It was a heavenly sight." This is a holy presence, the vision of which no mortal being has the power to remove. "Dear Lord in Heaven! it was a joy / The dead men could not blast." The Mariner, having confessed his sin and endured his penance, has finally been granted absolution by a third presence, a good Hermit. "He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away / The Albatross's blood."

In the concluding section, **Part 7**, the Mariner, accompanied by the Hermit, is miraculously saved from drowning as the ship suddenly sinks. "Stunned by that loud and dreadful sound, / . . . Like one that hath been seven days drowned / My body lay afloat." Shortly thereafter, the Mariner "stood on the firm land," and he immediately asks the Hermit to hear his confession. "O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man." When asked by the Hermit to state what type of man he really is, his body is subjected to a violent twisting by an invisible force; this overwhelming physical gesture causes him to speak up. As a result, the Mariner is at last set free. "Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched / With a woeful agony, / And then it left me free."

An evil spirit leaves his body. This last "trial" in the Mariner's imaginative journey signals his final step toward spiritual redemption. The completion of the redemptive process has a strange effect on the Mariner, who is now compelled to tell his tale to a stranger whenever the right one appears. "I have strange power of speech; / That moment that his face I see, / I know the man that must hear me."

And so the poem of the ancient Mariner ends with the Wedding-Guest unable to attend the marriage because he is "stunned, /And is

of sense forlorn." Though the tale is over, and the Mariner has learned the lesson that man must love "all things both great and small," the end of the narrative is ambiguous. The Wedding-Guest remains captive, still within the grasp of the old man's overwhelming rhetorical powers. That captivity prevents the Wedding-Guest from participating in the marriage sacrament, compelling him instead to participate in the Mariner's imaginative journey. "A sadder and a wise man, / He rose the morrow morn." ❀

Critical Views on
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Maud Bodkin on the Emotional Effects of the Poem

[Maud Bodkin is the author of *The Quest for Salvation in an Ancient and Modern Play* (1941). In the excerpt below from her chapter entitled "A Study of 'the Ancient Mariner' and of the Rebirth of Archetype," Bodkin discusses the emotional effects this poem produces in the reader.]

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is a poem that, within its lifetime of a century and odd years, has proved its power to awaken a deep response in many individuals. Also it is a romantic poem in the full sense of that term, as expounded, for example, by Professor Abercrombie—a poem whose reality depends upon the inner experience projected into its fantastic adventures, or, in the words of Coleridge himself, a poem in which the shadows of imagination become momentarily credible through 'the semblance of truth' which we transfer to them 'from our inward nature'. Such a poem seems specially likely to reward the kind of examination proposed in these essays. To inquire concerning the emotional patterns activated in response to the poem is to inquire into the poem's meaning—in the sense of that emotional meaning which gives it reality and importance to the reader, as distinct from any truth it might convey concerning happenings in the outer world. To communicate emotional rather than intellectual meaning is characteristic of all poetry, but we may well select, at the outset of our study, poems the ground of whose appeal is most evidently the expression of the inner life. ⟨. . .⟩

I would propose first the question: What is the significance, within the experience communicated by *The Ancient Mariner,* of the becalming and the renewed motion of the ship, or of the falling and rising of the wind? I would ask the reader who is familiar with the whole poem to take opportunity to feel the effect, in relation to the whole, of the group of verses, from Part the Second:

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!
>
> . . . .
>
> Day after day, day after day,
> We stuck, nor breath nor motion:
> As idle as a painted ship
> Upon a painted ocean.

and from Part the Sixth:

> 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.
>
> It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
> Like a meadow-gale of spring—
> It mingled strangely with my fears,
> Yet it felt like a welcoming. ⟨. . .⟩

Mr. Hugh I'Anson Fausset in his study of Coleridge has pronounced the poem of *The Ancient Mariner* 'an involuntary but inevitable projection into imagery of his own inner discord'. Of the images of the stagnant calm and of the subsequent effortless movement of the ship, Fausset says they were 'symbols of his own spiritual experience, of his sense of the lethargy that smothered his creative powers and his belief that only by some miracle of ecstasy which transcended all personal volition, he could elude a temperamental impotence'. If we pass from considering our own response to the poem to consider with Fausset the more speculative question, what were the emotional associations in the mind of Coleridge with the imagery he used, there seems to be a good deal that confirms Fausset's interpretation.

Coleridge has told us how poignantly he felt an obscure symbolism in natural objects. 'In looking at objects of Nature,' he writes, 'I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking* for, a symbolical language for something within me that already and for ever exists, than observing anything new.' This is a typical expression of that attitude which Abercrombie describes as characteristic of the romantic poet—the projection of the inner experience outward upon actuality. There seems little doubt that, possessing this tendency to find in natural objects an expression of the inner life, Coleridge felt in wind and in stagnant calm symbols of the contrasted states he knew so poignantly, of ecstasy and of dull inertia.

He has told us of the times when he felt 'forsaken by all the *forms* and *colourings* of existence, as if the *organs* of life had been dried up; as if only simple Being remained, blind and stagnant'; and again, of his longing for the swelling gust, and 'slant night-shower driving loud and fast' which, 'whilst they awed'—

> Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
> Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

So, also, the image of a ship driving before the wind is used by him as a conscious metaphor to express happy surrender to the creative impulse. 'Now he sails right onward' he says of Wordsworth engaged upon *The Prelude,* 'it is all open ocean and a steady breeze, and he drives before it'. In *The Ancient Mariner* the magic breeze, and the miraculous motion of the ship, or its becalming, are not, of course, like the metaphor, symbolic in conscious intention. They are symbolic only in the sense that, by the poet as by some at least of his readers, the images are valued because they give—even though this function remain unrecognized—expression to feelings that were seeking a language to relieve their inner urgency.

In the case of this symbolism of wind and calm we have a basis of evidence so wide that we hardly need go for proof to introspective reports of reader or poet—interesting as it is to see the confirmatory relation between evidence from the different sources. We find graven in the substance of language testimony to the kinship, or even identity, of the felt experience of the rising of the wind and the quickening of the human spirit.

—Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934): pp. 26–27, 34–35.

Peter Kitson on the Influence of the French Revolution

[Peter Kitson is a well-known scholar and the author of numerous books and articles on the Romantics. He is a contributing editor of such titles as *Coleridge and the*

Armoury of the Human Mind: Essays on His Prose Writings and *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire: 1780–1830*. In the excerpt below from his article, "Coleridge, the French Revolution, and 'The Ancient Mariner': Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation," Kitson discusses the relevance of the French Revolution and the origins of Coleridge's ideas on guilt and restoration.]

S. T. Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' was written against the background of the collapse of the poet's hopes for the improvement of mankind by political action, the ultimate failure of the French Revolution to distinguish itself from its oppressive Bourbon predecessors. The contribution of Coleridge's political beliefs to this poem has never been fully appreciated. Certainly 'The Ancient Mariner' has none of the political allusions which stud the contemporaneous 'France: an Ode' or 'Fears in Solitude' and this has led most critics to concur with E. M. W. Tillyard that the poem exhibits 'a total lack of politics'. Yet given the circumstances which gave rise to 'The Ancient Mariner', this very absence of political content is itself political. As Carl Woodring puts it, if Coleridge's supernatural poems are poems of escape, 'politics form a large part of what they escaped from'.

The importance of the French Revolution to 'The Ancient Mariner' can be seen in Coleridge's obsession with that other poet and disillusioned supporter of revolution, John Milton. During 1795–96 he fills the Gutch memorandum notebook with allusions and references to Toland's edition of Milton's prose works of 1698. Coleridge had Milton's career very much in mind when writing 'The Ancient Mariner'. Like himself, the poet of *Paradise Lost* had witnessed the complete wreck of his own hopes for a regenerated nation. In March 1819 Coleridge delivered a lecture on Milton and *Paradise Lost* which tells us a great deal about his own state of mind. Milton was: '. . . as every truly great poet has ever been, a good man; but finding it impossible to realize his own aspirations, either in religion or politics, or society, he gave up his heart to the living spirit and light within him, and avenged himself on the world by enriching it with this record of his own transcendent ideal'. 〈. . .〉

The ideas of guilt and restoration which are implicit in 'The Ancient Mariner' were developed by Coleridge over several years and grew out of his observation of the career of the French Revolution.

Coleridge appears to have become a supporter of the Revolution and an upholder of dissenting views of society and religion through his contact with William Frend during his time at Jesus College, Cambridge. Whatever the source of his opinions, it is clear that Coleridge became a keen supporter of the Revolution who remained loyal even during the difficult years of Robespierre's Terror. Like other British radicals Coleridge ascribed the excesses of the Revolution to the intervention of the counter-revolutionary forces who combined to destroy it in 1792. 〈. . .〉

There have been almost as many readings of 'The Ancient Mariner' as there are critics. Few, however, have made any real attempt to place the poem within the context of Coleridge's loss of faith in political action, a context which is demanded by Coleridge's other writings. Most critics have taken as a starting point Coleridge's contemporaneous candidature for the Unitarian ministry at Shrewsbury and have located the poem in a Christian environment. As Robert Penn Warren puts it, the shooting of the albatross 'symbolises the Fall, and the Fall has qualities important here: it is a condition of will, as Coleridge says "out of time", it is the result of no single motive'. Non-Christian evaluations of the poem have tended to follow J. L. Lowes's dictum that 'The punishment, measured by the standards of a world of balanced penalties, palpably does not fit the crime'. The moral of the poem, outside the poem, is meaningless. Such critics as E. E. Bostetter have denied that the poem contains any balanced theology; instead it shows that 'the universe is the projection not of reasoned beliefs but of irrational fears and guilt feelings'. These critics ignore the religious elements of the poem, concentrating instead on its psychological aspects. At least two critics, however, have made an attempt to locate the poem in Coleridge's political development. William Empson argues that it was the maritime expansion of colonial powers and their subsequent guilt at their treatment of other civilizations which is the poem's main theme, and J. R. Ebbatson believes that the punishment meted out to the mariner and his shipmates represents 'European racial guilt, and the need to make restitution'.

Christian readings tend to stress the redemptive aspects of the poem whereas non-Christian evaluations concentrate on the strong sense of guilt it communicates. It is not within the scope of this discussion to adjudicate between the two positions. Instead I should

like to place the poem in the context of Coleridge's retreat from politics and his new-found sense of inward and individual restoration. Within this framework the elements of redemption and guilt are of paramount importance.

Coleridge was disillusioned with the French Revolution but also convinced of the depth of his own country's guilt. He had come to believe that this national and collective guilt was only a reflection of man's original sin. During the composition of 'The Ancient Mariner' Coleridge was brooding upon his own sense of personal guilt. In this sense D. W. Harding is right; Coleridge knew very well the mental depression and sense of worthlessness with which he invests his mariner in Part IV of the poem:

> Alone, alone, all, all alone,
> Alone on a wide wide sea!
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony.

The Mariner becomes aware of his own inner depravity and isolation: 'A wicked whisper came, and made | My heart as dry as dust.' It was a crime for the mariner to shoot the albatross just as it was a crime for Eve to eat the apple. It was also a crime for Coleridge to believe and encourage people to expect that mankind could improve itself by its own action unaided by grace. As R. L. Brett puts it, 'the killing of the albatross is representative of a class of which it is itself typical. It is symbolical . . . of all sin'.

—Peter Kitson, "Coleridge, the French Revolution, and 'The Ancient Mariner': Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation," *Yearbook of English Studies* 19 (1989): pp. 197, 198, 204–05.

JOHN T. NETLAND ON THE ROLES OF THE WEDDING-GUEST AND THE EDITOR

[In the excerpt below from his article "Reading and Resistance: The Hermeneutic Subtext of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,*" John T. Netland argues that within the

poem are two respondents to the mariner's strange tale, the Wedding-Guest and the gloss-writing editor, each of whom serves a particular interpretive function.]

In our attention to the Mariner's gripping narrative, we often forget that the poem is, at least on one level, about understanding—and responding to—an extraordinary tale. The poem contains a record of two such respondents: the Wedding-Guest who is compelled to listen to the Mariner, who overcomes his early resistance to the "grey-beard loon," and who emerges from the encounter deeply moved; and the gloss-writing editor who, in the written record of his reading, demonstrates a sympathetic, scholarly interest as he seeks to explain and interpret the tale, but who never shares the Wedding-Guest's affective response. This hermeneutic subtext is also apparent in the cryptic nature of the narrative itself. The tale unfolds as a mythological narrative about the supernatural, revealing a primal pattern of fall, confession, and restoration. The Mariner commits a grievous offense which, however cryptic it remains, consists of something more heinous than killing the bird: he has transgressed a moral order, the nature of which he is at first unaware and of which he remains only dimly cognizant at the end of the tale. The narrative remains a story with an elusive meaning, and translating story into ideational coherence becomes the necessary hermeneutic task, a task undertaken by the historically belated writer of the marginal glosses. Although we might expect this reader, with his apparent sympathy and scholarly acumen, to represent the ideal Coleridgean reader, we discover on the contrary that his notes do precious little to help us understand the Mariner's experience. Rather, it is the Wedding-Guest who emerges from this encounter "sadder and wiser," who, by being initiated into a profoundly meaningful (if mysterious and disturbing) human experience, demonstrates a much clearer understanding of the Mariner's experience than does the gloss-writer.

What accounts for the difference between these two respondents? Certainly one possibility, now a staple of criticism, is the distinction between knowing and experiencing: the gloss-writer is so intent upon knowing what transpired that he fails to experience the pathos of the tale in the way that the Wedding-Guest does. Yet beyond such privileging of emotional experience over cognition, the gloss-writer's failure is also an imaginative failure. There are no relevant categories

in the gloss-writer's rationalistic, enlightened mind in which to place the Mariner's distinctly non-rational experience. This textual encounter between the editor and the Mariner thus problematizes the hermeneutic encounter of a modern, rationalistic reader with a distinctly premodern, myth-like text, and the hermeneutical impasse in the marginalia stems from the failure of this reader to negotiate his own ideological commitments and boundaries with those quite different values of the Mariner. In contrast to Suleiman's dissenting reader, who stops disbelieving the narrative conventions after having suspended disbelief, and to McGann, who consciously resists what he believes to be an act of ideological coercion, this gloss-writing reader simply ignores that which lies beyond his imagination.

Though virtually ignored for nearly a century after publication, the marginal glosses have generated no little interest in the twentieth century. 〈. . .〉 Though the voices of the Mariner and this editor were recognized as distinct, most early analyses managed to harmonize the differences. More recently, critics have seen these differences as irreconcilable and competitive. Not surprisingly, as Max Schulz notes, "deconstructionists, phenomenologists, and critical skeptics of varying hues [have seized] on the interplay between poetic narrator and prose glossist as an ironic model of the rhetorical experience that is the reader's." Yet one need not rely solely on contemporary theory to insist that the gloss notes represent an ironic point of view, for Coleridge's practice of and reflections on reading during the years in which he revised the marginalia suggest that the gloss notes can hardly be taken at face value. 〈. . .〉

It is not simply a tension between competing moral visions that these voices reveal. Sarah Dyck, Frances Ferguson, and K. M. Wheeler have all pointed out differences between the gloss-writer's and Mariner's moral visions: the gloss-writer's systematic attempts to attribute causality and to impose moral closure on the narrative by insisting on the primacy of the Mariner's lesson in universal benevolence; the Mariner's unsystematic, inarticulate, and likely uncomprehended experience in a world whose morality—though real—resists easy classification. Such readings properly increase our distrust of the facile ease with which the gloss notes reduce the Mariner's experience to a simple ethical lesson. Yet there is a deeper tension in this poem, a tension which becomes clearer when this dialogic relationship of text and commentary is situated in the

hermeneutical and doctrinal polemics of the emerging discipline of biblical scholarship, with which Coleridge was both familiar and actively engaged. By situating the poem in the Higher Critical hermeneutical tradition, McGann alerts us to the ideological tensions between reader and text. What his analysis does not acknowledge, however, is that the poem is less syncretistic and harmonious than he suggests; rather, it contains a tension between contrasting religious imaginations—between the mystical, symbolic, irrational power of the religious sublime on the one hand and a categorical, enlightened, and rational systemization of religious experience on the other. And this narrative tension works precisely to undermine the type of modernist presumption with which McGann calls for a resistance to Coleridge's presumably outdated Christian ideology.

—John T. Netland, "Reading and Resistance: The Hermeneutic Subtext of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *Christianity and Literature* 43, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): pp. 39–40, 41.

Sarah Webster Goodwin on the Wedding Ceremony

[Sarah Webster Goodwin has written many articles on the Romantic period. She is also a contributing editor of such titles as *Death and Representation* and *The Scope of Words: In Honor of Albert S. Cook*. In the excerpt below from her article on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Goodwin focuses on the often marginalized wedding ceremony as the true center of the mariner's story.]

Domesticity is not exactly what comes to mind when you read either *Frankenstein* or "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." These are not works about *Gemütlichkeit*, plenitude, the pleasures of the hearth. If we are to look for domesticity in them, we have to turn to the margins. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" literally marginalizes the home, embodied in the wedding that frames the poem and whose domesticized bowers and maidens are apparently antithetical to everything in the mariner's tale. *Frankenstein* might be said to

invert that structure since it opens and closes on an ocean voyage with a narrator who explicitly refers to Coleridge's poem as a guiding influence; and all three of the novel's most climactic moments occur when the monster enters a home and destroys it—one of them on Frankenstein's wedding night. Thus the structural inversion is really a mirror image: in both works domesticity is marginal, threatened, seemingly inadequate to the powers informing the central acts and mysteries that are narrated. 〈. . .〉

These works repress domesticity, and the monstrous arises from that repression. Departing from Freud's theory of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche,* in which Freud shows that the uncanny embraces both meaning of *heimlich*—the secret and the familiar—I want to reconsider the secret affinity between the domestic and the monstrous. In these works, feminine domesticity is closely aligned with kitsch, that uncanny monster that is both marginal to art and its mirror image.

Kitsch eludes easy definition; it is a term that not only censures a would-be art object, but also locates the work within a certain kind of relation to art. That relation has several dimensions in the evolution of kitsch as a critical category. First, the work of art is construed as authentic, in contrast to the inauthenticity of kitsch. Second, the inauthenticity of kitsch derives directly from its place in a postindustrial economy; this economy represents art as commodity. Thus its development in history directly parallels that of middle-class consumerism—and, not coincidentally, of Romanticism as cultural phenomenon: kitsch and Romanticism emerged at the same historical moment. 〈. . .〉 I am arguing here that kitsch is also related to gender differences, that certain kinds of kitsch are marginalized because of their links with feminine domesticity. To put it most bluntly, "high" art historically needs to leave home. As art's uncanny double, kitsch must be repressed, silenced, kept out of sight in the work that aspires to seriousness. But the very process of repression can leave its uncanny traces in the text. *Frankenstein* and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are works haunted by a repressed feminine domesticity whose identity is closely related to "inauthentic" art—to kitsch. 〈. . .〉

Looked at through this lens, it would seem that the wedding at the margin of the ancient mariner's story is in fact its center—its secret care, even its obsession. That suspicion is confirmed by the

grotesque female form that appears at one of the poem's turning points, the figure that approaches on the spectre ship and casts dice for the mariner's soul:

> *Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,
> Her locks were yellow as gold:
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold.

This is the harlot who inverts, and subverts, the wedding—who blights with plagues the marriage hearse. She has been read as the deformed mother, the object of desire distorted by the poet's guilt and rage. Any biblical or apocalyptic reading of the poem must take her into account as the Whore of Babylon, seductive but fatal, the dark counterpart to a vision of the New Jerusalem. Her complement is not only the bride, but the good mother, Mary, whose protective powers the mariner repeatedly invokes. Multiply demonic, LIFE-IN-DEATH has the bad taste to win the dice game against her presumably male opponent—and to cry out in triumph. There seems little question that hers is the triumph of the castrating female, that secret, fearful presence at the heart of the home. The mariner must encounter that presence even in the exclusively, oppressively male domain of the ship at sea. Although critics have consistently located the poem's climax in Part VII, the moment when the mariner blesses the (phallic, possibly narcissistic) water snakes, surely the encounter with LIFE-IN-DEATH is at least as central. Her dice game marks a turning point in his existence from which there is clearly no return; and, as Edward Bostetter has pointed out, the fact that it is a game of *chance* she wins is crucial to any reading of the poem's larger meaning. Perhaps because critical debate about the poem has been much exercised to define the nature and consequences of the mariner's blessing, it has paid relatively little attention to what we might call the poem's other center, its feminine one.

—Sarah Webster Goodwin, "Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and *Frankenstein*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1991): pp. 93–95.

Morse Peckham on the Poem as a Voyage of Discovery

[Morse Peckham has written extensively on the Romantic period and is the author of numerous books, including *Romanticism and Ideology* and *The Romantic Virtuoso.* In the excerpt below, Peckham traces the predominant trope of a voyage of discovery to the travel literature of the 16th and 17th centuries. He argues that "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" is really a new type of poem exploring the relationship of the individual to his culture.]

Coleridge's claim in "France: An Ode," his response to the aggression of France towards Switzerland, that liberty could not be achieved by social instrumentalities meant that like Wordsworth he was engaged in rejecting his cultural tradition and in becoming increasingly alienated from the dominating traditions of European culture. And that is the theme of his greatest achievement, *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere.*

The foundational trope or metaphor of the poem came from the great sixteenth and seventeenth century voyage and travel compilations of Richard Hakluyt of 1589 (enlarged 1598–1600) and those of his assistant and successor, Samuel Purchas, in 1625: a voyage of discovery the culmination of which was the voyage around the world from England around Cape Horn to the Pacific and thence back to England. To tell the story of the poem would be otiose, for everyone educated in England or the United States knows it. But the poem's interpretation is another matter. For in fact it was a new kind of poetry. In an allegorical narrative the most important proper names, and sometimes all of them, belong to an explanatory system of which the poem itself is an exemplification. In this poem there is nothing of the sort, at least in the poem's original form. Indeed, we are justified in seeking to explain the poem, to consider it as a kind of allegory in which the proper names do not belong to any explanatory system, only because the lines "And she is far liker Death than he; / Her flesh makes the still air cold" are changed in the final version (1817) to "The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she / Who thicks man's blood with cold." The clearly allegorical proper names, capitalized by Coleridge, provides a strong instruction that the whole poem is properly considered an exemplification of some kind

of explanatory system—although at first glance indeterminable—whether religious, political, metaphysical, or psychological.

With this hint it is possible to discern a pattern to the whole, and that pattern is best understood as concerned with the relation of the individual to his culture. The first step is to realize that the Mariner commits the same kind of action twice—first when he shoots the albatross which had played with the sailors and shared their food; and second when he interrupts the wedding and holds the wedding guest back from a celebration of social solidarity. Both actions are violations of community and as such are typical Romantic cultural vandalisms. This redundancy is extended when the priest to whom the Mariner confesses goes mad. Confession does not, as it should, restore the Mariner to solidarity with a community. And by a further extension of this redundancy the Mariner is condemned to eternal wandering and telling his story without receiving absolution or membership in any community.

Coleridge does not provide explanations for any of these actions and events. He is interested only in the nature of the act and its consequences. This is why the ship set out from England with no stated purpose either of exploration or of economic enterprise. Coleridge thus abstracts society, or community, from the matrix of interactions, without considering the possible purpose or goal of social relationships and patterns of interaction. So the Mariner's act is incomprehensible; Coleridge appears to be looking at Wordsworth's incomprehensible abandonments from the point of view of the abandoner, the violator. And it might even be said that the Mariner's crime (as Coleridge calls it in his 1817 gloss) is a manifestation of an alienation symbolized most traditionally by the antarctic cold, which is subsequently identified with Life-in-Death. But this cold is followed by the entrance into a new world, one into which no human had ever penetrated. The Mariner finds himself in an absolutely novel cultural condition, one in which his primary feeling is guilt as indicated by the heat, by the albatross hung around his neck instead of the cross, the emblem of Christian community, and by the death of his shipmates. He is now completely alone in a terrifyingly hideous and repulsive world. But again incomprehensibly he blesses the horrifying monsters of the world, and blesses them unconsciously. "Unaware" is Coleridge's word. Here is a parallel to the subsequent creation of Liberty by the culturally unaided individual in "France: An Ode." The albatross

drops into the sea; the Mariner is freed from a culturally assigned and determined guilt. Beneath the notion of liberty in "France" lies the profound notion of the ascription of value; the Mariner's hideous world suddenly changes into a world of great beauty. Moreover it is done unconsciously. Coleridge's way of indicating with the utmost commitment that the creation of value is not a social act but one which arises from an individual's resources—resources which he does not know he has and which he cannot consciously control.

—Morse Peckham, *The Birth of Romanticism: Cultural Crisis 1790–1815*, Greenwood, Fla.: The Penkevill Publishing Company, 1986): pp. 126–28.

H. R. Rookmaaker Jr. on Humanity's Relationship with Nature

[H. R. Rookmaaker Jr. is a well-known scholar and the author of several books, including *Synthetist Art Theories: Genesis and Nature of the Ideas on the Art of Gauguin and His Circle* (1959). In the excerpt below from the chapter entitled "Alienation Reconsidered: 'The Ancient Mariner,'" Rookmaaker argues against a moral interpretation of the poem and instead focuses on the difficulties inherent in humanity's relationship with nature.]

Many critics have tended to interpret the poem in moral terms along lines broadly indicated by Adair's statement that '*The Ancient Mariner* is concerned with the existence of evil, the spiritual aridity which follows it, and the eternal wandering of the soul which is only partially redeemed'. In contrast, I will argue that the primary significance of the poem is not of a moral character, but epistemological in that it deals with an exploration of the implications of Coleridge's attitude to the relation between man and nature, as it has been outlined in the previous chapters of this study.

Before presenting my own case, I will indicate briefly some of the more influential approaches to the poem. R. P. Warren's famous essay, 'A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading' may

serve as an example of the more optimistic moral interpretations of the poem. He argues that the poem essentially tells 'a story of crime and punishment and repentance and reconciliation' and he characterizes its primary theme as 'the theme of sacramental vision, or the theme of the "One Life"'. In his conception the shooting of the albatross 're-enacts the Fall' in that it is 'symbolically, a murder, and a particularly heinous murder, for it involves the violation of hospitality and of gratitude . . . and of sanctity'. For this murder the mariner is subsequently punished, after which a process of reconciliation is set in motion culminating in the mariner's recognition of the 'one Life'. 〈. . .〉

If one believes with Warren that the poem describes an ordered, just, and ultimately benevolent universe, one can hardly avoid the vexing problem of the significance of its natural and supernatural imagery. Warren tries to impose a consistent pattern of symbolism on the imagery, but, as has been shown repeatedly by others, his attempt does not really succeed. Warren's excellent failure in this respect has made other critics wary of proposing a comprehensive interpretation of the poem's imagery. But the stakes are high: if the imagery is inconsistent or arbitrary, it must be concluded that the mariner's universe, described in terms of this imagery, is to some extent arbitrary and without order. No wonder that critics have continued the attempt to find a satisfactory symbolic pattern in the imagery. 〈. . .〉

It will be argued that Coleridge's preoccupation with man's relation to nature, with the difficulties inherent in his notion of nature's life-giving activity and man's passive receptivity, is also the poet's main concern in 'The Ancient Mariner'.

It may be best to recall briefly the stage of development Coleridge's thought had reached when he wrote 'The Ancient Mariner'. At this time he did not question the benevolent, divine character of the external world. He believed that if man is open to nature's influence, he will come to recognize God in nature resulting in virtue, happiness, and a true understanding of the world and its beauty. Of decisive importance is the conditional clause, 'if man is open to nature's influence': nature is the language God speaks to man, but it is up to man whether he is willing to listen to it or not.

Man can also shut himself off from nature's influence, consciously like the protagonist of Wordsworth's 'Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree', or unconsciously, through grief or guilt, like Margaret in 'The Ruined Cottage', or Osorio. As Coleridge had already affirmed in 1796, man is capable of 'Untenanting creation of its God', so that instead of 'a vision shadowy of Truth', he sees 'vice, and anguish, and the wormy grave, / Shapes of a dream'. If man is blind to the presence of divine light in nature, he is left with his own self-imposed darkness which he in turn projects on nature so that he becomes 'A sordid solitary thing . . . / Feeling himself, his own low self the whole', surrounded by a nature that is no more than an extension of his own mind, his own dejection or fear.

In 'The Ancient Mariner' Coleridge tried to face the implications of this reverse side of his faith in nature, tried to describe the causes and consequences of man's alienation from nature and God. If this is accepted, it will appear that the poem has its proper place in the development of Coleridge's thought and does not contradict his statements in the apparently more optimistic poems he wrote at the same time.

—H. R. Rookmaaker Jr., *Towards a Romantic Conception of Nature: Coleridge's Poetry Up to 1803: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984): pp. 65, 66–67, 68–69.