The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Content
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is made up of seven parts and is set in a boundless sea with days of pitiless sun and nights lit by the moon. It is introduced by an 'Argument' containing a short summary of the whole poem which consists of two narratives: one is made up of the captions to the right of the stanzas; the other is the poem itself, which deals with the extraordinary adventures of the Mariner.

Atmosphere and characters
The atmosphere of the whole poem is charged with irresistible mystery because of the combination of the supernatural and the commonplace, dream-like elements and astonishing visual realism.

The Mariner and his comrades are hardly characters in any dramatic sense. They are more types than human beings and their agonies are simply universally human. The Mariner does not speak as a moral agent: he is passive in guilt and remorse. When he acts, he does so blindly, under compulsion. From his paralysis of conscience, terrifying and yet refreshing, the Mariner succeeds in gaining his authority, though he pays for it by remaining in the condition of an outcast. Coleridge makes him spectator as well as actor in the drama, so that he can recount even his worst terrors with the calm of lucid retrospection.

'The Rime' and traditional ballads
This poem contains many of the features traditionally associated with ballads (\(\text{MB, 2.8}\)), that is: the combination of dialogue and narration; the four-line stanza; frequent repetition; alliteration and internal rhyme; the theme of travel and wandering and supernatural elements. But the presence of a moral at the end and the didactic aim make The Rime of the Ancient Mariner different from a traditional ballad.

Interpretations
This poem has been interpreted in many ways:

- it may be the description of a dream, which allows the poet to relate the supernatural and the less conscious part of his psyche to a familiar experience. In fact it moves in abrupt stages, each of which has its own single, dominating character. Its visual impressions are brilliant; things move indeed in a mysterious way, but not without some connecting relations;
- Coleridge's poem may also be an allegory of the life of the soul in its passage from crime, through punishment, to redemption;
- the interpretation that seems most relevant, however, is the one which sees the poem as a description of the poetic journey of Romanticism. The Mariner is the poet, possessed by a song that derives from guilt. This guilt is the actual origin of poetry: it is the regret for a state of lost innocence caused by the Industrial Revolution, or an attempt to re-discover it by telling a symbolic story of its loss. Poetry coincides with this sense of loss and, at the same time, tries to fill it.
GUIDED ANALYSIS

"THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER"

"The Rime" is the story of a crime and its punishment told by the protagonist himself, an old sailor who is condemned to expiate his guilt: to travel for ever from land to land telling his story and teaching, by his example, love and reverence for all God's creatures.

The poem is divided into seven parts, each one ending with a hint at the crime, and each one constituting a new stage in the progress from crime to punishment.

TITLE

The title suggests the fantastic, gothic atmosphere of a ballad narrated by an old and skillful sailor.

Even though it is concerned with the supernatural, the "Rime" shows a progression of events resulting from a sequence of causes and effects which lead to an acceptable conclusion.

The result is a poem where the alternation of real and unreal elements give the narration a certain degree of credibility, without weakening the sense of horror and supernatural mystery it conveys to the reader.

REAL VS UNREAL

The poem is made up of both real and unreal elements:

REAL:

- The opening setting: a wedding feast and a street
- The precise position of the sun in the sky according to the hemisphere in which the ship is sailing.
- The weather suddenly changes as often happens at sea.
- There are hints at the Mariner's native country (harbor, church, hill, lighthouse).
- A boat appears with a pilot who saves the Mariner from the shipwreck.

UNREAL:

- Nature is perceived as deformed: the ice glistens with strange colours and gives out nightmarish sounds; the sun looks bloody and the moon extraordinarily white; the sea appears with strange colours; the wind suddenly becomes noiseless and motionless though still pushing the ship on.

ROMANTIC ELEMENTS:

The sense of mystery, the reference to medieval and oriental superstitions (the Albatross is a sort of mystical bird whose killing is like a sacrilege and needs punishment), a ghost ship which approaches carrying two ghosts on board, the description of unnatural facts, the presence of unnatural creatures (sea-monsters, spirits, angels, seraphs).

MYSTERY: the sense of mystery is introduced by the Mariner and by the Albatross.

The Mariner conveys the sense of mystery with:

- His sudden, strange intrusion upon the wedding guest.
- His appearance (skinny hand, long grey beard and above all his glittering eye which has a sort of hypnotic power).
- His way of speaking so full of archaisms which bring the reader back in time, into an imaginary past.

The Albatross comes from nowhere and it is always accompanied by strange phenomena.

The Albatross has a lot of symbolic meanings: creative imagination; unifying agent in the poem; original sin; Christ.

The mysterious atmosphere is also given by supernatural events, for example when the ship moves without wind or noise and when it is manoeuvred by a crew of dead people.
SYMBOLISM

All the elements mentioned above help the reader to give the poem different interpretations:

- **ALLEGORY OF LIFE**
- **MORAL PARABLE OF MAN**
- **CONTRAST RATIONALITY/IRRATIONALITY**

**ALLEGORY OF LIFE:** the voyage told by the Mariner could be seen as an allegory of life where the crew represents mankind, the Albatross stands for love which should unify all God’s creatures and the ship which symbolizes a microcosm where the evil action of a single person falls on others too. The killing of the Albatross symbolizes a crime against hospitality, a crime that breaks the holy law linking all the living things in an ideal brotherhood.

**MORAL PARABLE OF MAN:** the poem can be seen as a moral parable of man from the original sin (the killing), through punishment (isolation), repentance (the blessing of the water snakes) and the penitence (the obsessive repetition of the story), to his final redemption.

**CONTRAST RATIONALITY/IRRATIONALITY:** rationality is identified with sunlight; irrationality is represented by moonlight. In other words, sunlight, or day would represent the power of reason. Moonlight (night) is the power of imagination.

**CHARACTERS**

**THE PROTAGONIST:** the sailor who tells the story of his voyage and his killing of the Albatross. He is described physically (skinny hands, glittering eye, long grey beard) and emotionally (well-determined, instinctive, individual). Symbolically, the Mariner embodies Mankind who has to cope with his inexorable destiny. He also symbolizes the fall of man, punishment and salvation.

**SECONDARY CHARACTER:** the wedding guest is the counterpart, the listener, the Mariner’s projection. He embodies a common man who, in the end, becomes wiser since he has understood the meaning of life.

**THE CREW ON THE SHIP:** is a microcosm in which the evil actions of a single person falls on others, too.

**THE ALBATROSS:** is the superior entity coming from nowhere.

**SETTING**

At the beginning it is real, then the atmosphere changes, it gets unreal, gothic, fantastic, nightmarish, dreadful, peopled with spirits, monsters, dead men, strange animals and noises.