

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Context

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in Devon in 1772. His father, a clergyman, moved his family to London when Coleridge was young, and it was there that Coleridge attended school (as he would later recall in poems such as "Frost at Midnight"). He later attended Cambridge but left without completing his studies. During the politically charged atmosphere of the late eighteenth century--the French Revolution had sent shockwaves through Europe, and England and France were at war--Coleridge made a name for himself both as a political radical and as an important young poet; along with his friends Robert Southey and William Wordsworth, he became one of the most important writers in England. Collaborating with Wordsworth on the revolutionary *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, Coleridge helped to inaugurate the Romantic era in England; as Wordsworth explained it in the 1802 preface to the third edition of the work, the idea of poetry underlying *Lyrical Ballads* turned the established conventions of poetry upside down: Privileging natural speech over poetic ornament, simply stated themes over elaborate symbolism, emotion over abstract thought, and the experience of natural beauty over urban sophistication, the book paved the way for two generations of poets, and stands as one of the milestones of European literature.

While Coleridge made important contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, it was much more Wordsworth's project than Coleridge's; thus, while it is possible to understand Wordsworth's poetic output in light of his preface to the 1802 edition of the volume, the preface's ideas should not be used to analyze Coleridge's work. Insofar as Wordsworth was the poet of nature, the purity of childhood, and memory, Coleridge became the poet of imagination, exploring the relationships between nature and the mind as it exists as a separate entity. Poems such as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" demonstrate Coleridge's talent for concocting bizarre, unsettling stories full of fantastic imagery and magic; in poems such as "Frost at Midnight" and "Dejection: An Ode," he muses explicitly on the nature of the mind as it interacts with the creative source of nature.

Coleridge married in 1795 and spent much of the next decade living near and traveling with Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. In 1799, Coleridge met Sara Hutchinson, with whom he fell deeply in love, forming an attachment that was to last many years. Coleridge became an opium addict (it is thought that "Kubla Khan" originated from an opium dream) and, in 1816, moved in with the surgeon James Gillman in order to preserve his health. During the years he lived with Gillman, Coleridge composed many of his important non-fiction works, including the highly regarded *Biographia Literaria*. However, although he continued to write until his death in 1834, Romanticism was always a movement about youth, and today Coleridge is remembered primarily for the poems he wrote while still in his twenties.

Analysis

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's place in the canon of English poetry rests on a comparatively small body of achievement: a few poems from the late 1790s and early 1800s and his participation in the revolutionary publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1797. Unlike Wordsworth, his work cannot be understood through the lens of the 1802 preface to the second edition of that book; though it does resemble Wordsworth's in its idealization of nature and its emphasis on human joy, Coleridge's poems often favor musical effects over the plainness of common speech. The intentional archaisms of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and the hypnotic drone of "Kubla Khan" do not imitate common speech, creating instead a more strikingly stylized effect.

Further, Coleridge's poems complicate the phenomena Wordsworth takes for granted: the simple unity between the child and nature and the adult's reconnection with nature through memories of childhood; in poems such as "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge indicates the fragility of the child's innocence by

relating his own urban childhood. In poems such as "Dejection: An Ode" and "Nightingale," he stresses the division between his own mind and the beauty of the natural world. Finally, Coleridge often privileges weird tales and bizarre imagery over the commonplace, rustic simplicities Wordsworth advocates; the "thousand thousand slimy things" that crawl upon the rotting sea in the "Rime" would be out of place in a Wordsworth poem.

If Wordsworth represents the central pillar of early Romanticism, Coleridge is nevertheless an important structural support. His emphasis on the imagination, its independence from the outside world and its creation of fantastic pictures such as those found in the "Rime," exerted a profound influence on later writers such as Shelley; his depiction of feelings of alienation and numbness helped to define more sharply the Romantics' idealized contrast between the emptiness of the city--where such feelings are experienced--and the joys of nature. The heightened understanding of these feelings also helped to shape the stereotype of the suffering Romantic genius, often further characterized by drug addiction: this figure of the idealist, brilliant yet tragically unable to attain his own ideals, is a major pose for Coleridge in his poetry.

His portrayal of the mind as it moves, whether in silence ("Frost at Midnight") or in frenzy ("Kubla Khan") also helped to define the intimate emotionalism of Romanticism; while much of poetry is constituted of emotion recollected in tranquility, the origin of Coleridge's poems often seems to be emotion recollected in emotion. But (unlike Wordsworth, it could be argued) Coleridge maintains not only an emotional intensity but also a legitimate intellectual presence throughout his oeuvre and applies constant philosophical pressure to his ideas. In his later years, Coleridge worked a great deal on metaphysics and politics, and a philosophical consciousness infuses much of his verse--particularly poems such as "The Nightingale" and "Dejection: An Ode," in which the relationship between mind and nature is defined via the specific rejection of fallacious versions of it. The mind, to Coleridge, cannot take its feeling from nature and cannot falsely imbue nature with its own feeling; rather, the mind must be so suffused with its own joy that it opens up to the real, independent, "immortal" joy of nature.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Parts I-IV

Summary

Three young men are walking together to a wedding, when one of them is detained by a grizzled old sailor. The young Wedding-Guest angrily demands that the Mariner let go of him, and the Mariner obeys. But the young man is transfixed by the ancient Mariner's "glittering eye" and can do nothing but sit on a stone and listen to his strange tale. The Mariner says that he sailed on a ship out of his native harbor--"below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the lighthouse top"--and into a sunny and cheerful sea. Hearing bassoon music drifting from the direction of the wedding, the Wedding-Guest imagines that the bride has entered the hall, but he is still helpless to tear himself from the Mariner's story. The Mariner recalls that the voyage quickly darkened, as a giant storm rose up in the sea and chased the ship southward. Quickly, the ship came to a frigid land "of mist and snow," where "ice, mast-high, came floating by"; the ship was hemmed inside this maze of ice. But then the sailors encountered an Albatross, a great sea bird. As it flew around the ship, the ice cracked and split, and a wind from the south propelled the ship out of the frigid regions, into a foggy stretch of water. The Albatross followed behind it, a symbol of good luck to the sailors. A pained look crosses the Mariner's face, and the Wedding-Guest asks him, "Why look'st thou so?" The Mariner confesses that he shot and killed the Albatross with his crossbow.

At first, the other sailors were furious with the Mariner for having killed the bird that made the breezes blow. But when the fog lifted soon afterward, the sailors decided that the bird had actually brought not the breezes but the fog; they now congratulated the Mariner on his deed. The wind pushed the ship into a silent sea where the sailors were quickly stranded; the winds died down, and the ship was "As idle as

a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean." The ocean thickened, and the men had no water to drink; as if the sea were rotting, slimy creatures crawled out of it and walked across the surface. At night, the water burned green, blue, and white with death fire. Some of the sailors dreamed that a spirit, nine fathoms deep, followed them beneath the ship from the land of mist and snow. The sailors blamed the Mariner for their plight and hung the corpse of the Albatross around his neck like a cross.

A weary time passed; the sailors became so parched, their mouths so dry, that they were unable to speak. But one day, gazing westward, the Mariner saw a tiny speck on the horizon. It resolved into a ship, moving toward them. Too dry-mouthed to speak out and inform the other sailors, the Mariner bit down on his arm; sucking the blood, he was able to moisten his tongue enough to cry out, "A sail! a sail!" The sailors smiled, believing they were saved. But as the ship neared, they saw that it was a ghostly, skeletal hull of a ship and that its crew included two figures: Death and the Night-mare Life-in-Death, who takes the form of a pale woman with golden locks and red lips, and "thicks man's blood with cold." Death and Life-in-Death began to throw dice, and the woman won, whereupon she whistled three times, causing the sun to sink to the horizon, the stars to instantly emerge. As the moon rose, chased by a single star, the sailors dropped dead one by one--all except the Mariner, whom each sailor cursed "with his eye" before dying. The souls of the dead men leapt from their bodies and rushed by the Mariner.

The Wedding-Guest declares that he fears the Mariner, with his glittering eye and his skinny hand. The Mariner reassures the Wedding-Guest that there is no need for dread; he was not among the men who died, and he is a living man, not a ghost. Alone on the ship, surrounded by two hundred corpses, the Mariner was surrounded by the slimy sea and the slimy creatures that crawled across its surface. He tried to pray but was deterred by a "wicked whisper" that made his heart "as dry as dust." He closed his eyes, unable to bear the sight of the dead men, each of who glared at him with the malice of their final curse. For seven days and seven nights the Mariner endured the sight, and yet he was unable to die. At last the moon rose, casting the great shadow of the ship across the waters; where the ship's shadow touched the waters, they burned red. The great water snakes moved through the silvery moonlight, glittering; blue, green, and black, the snakes coiled and swam and became beautiful in the Mariner's eyes. He blessed the beautiful creatures in his heart; at that moment, he found himself able to pray, and the corpse of the Albatross fell from his neck, sinking "like lead into the sea."

Form

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is written in loose, short ballad stanzas usually either four or six lines long but, occasionally, as many as nine lines long. The meter is also somewhat loose, but odd lines are generally tetrameter, while even lines are generally trimeter. (There are exceptions: In a five-line stanza, for instance, lines one, three, and four are likely to have four accented syllables--tetrameter--while lines two and five have three accented syllables.) The rhymes generally alternate in an ABAB or ABABAB scheme, though again there are many exceptions; the nine-line stanza in Part III, for instance, rhymes AABCCBDDDB. Many stanzas include couplets in this way--five-line stanzas, for example, are rhymed ABCCB, often with an internal rhyme in the first line, or ABAAB, without the internal rhyme.

Commentary

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is unique among Coleridge's important works-- unique in its intentionally archaic language ("Eftsoons his hand drops he"), its length, its bizarre moral narrative, its strange scholarly notes printed in small type in the margins, its thematic ambiguity, and the long Latin epigraph that begins it, concerning the multitude of unclassifiable "invisible creatures" that inhabit the world. Its peculiarities make it quite atypical of its era; it has little in common with other Romantic works. Rather, the scholarly notes, the epigraph, and the archaic language combine to produce the impression (intended by Coleridge, no doubt) that the "Rime" is a ballad of ancient times (like "Sir

Patrick Spence," which appears in "Dejection: An Ode"), reprinted with explanatory notes for a new audience.

But the explanatory notes complicate, rather than clarify, the poem as a whole; while there are times that they explain some unarticulated action, there are also times that they interpret the material of the poem in a way that seems at odds with, or irrelevant to, the poem itself. For instance, in Part II, we find a note regarding the spirit that followed the ship nine fathoms deep: "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." What might Coleridge mean by introducing such figures as "the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus," into the poem, as marginalia, and by implying that the verse itself should be interpreted through him?

This is a question that has puzzled scholars since the first publication of the poem in this form.

(Interestingly, the original version of the "Rime," in the 1797 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, did not include the side notes.) There is certainly an element of humor in Coleridge's scholarly glosses--a bit of parody aimed at the writers of serious glosses of this type; such phrases as "Platonic Constantinopolitan" seem consciously silly. It can be argued that the glosses are simply an amusing irrelevancy designed to make the poem seem archaic and that the truly important text is the poem itself--in its complicated, often Christian symbolism, in its moral lesson (that "all creatures great and small" were created by God and should be loved, from the Albatross to the slimy snakes in the rotting ocean) and in its characters.

If one accepts this argument, one is faced with the task of discovering the key to Coleridge's symbolism: what does the Albatross represent, what do the spirits represent, and so forth. Critics have made many ingenious attempts to do just that and have found in the "Rime" a number of interesting readings, ranging from Christian parable to political allegory. But these interpretations are dampened by the fact that none of them (with the possible exception of the Christian reading, much of which is certainly intended by the poem) seems essential to the story itself. One can accept these interpretations of the poem only if one disregards the glosses almost completely.

A more interesting, though still questionable, reading of the poem maintains that Coleridge intended it as a commentary on the ways in which people interpret the lessons of the past and the ways in which the past is, to a large extent, simply unknowable. By filling his archaic ballad with elaborate symbolism that cannot be deciphered in any single, definitive way and then framing that symbolism with side notes that pick at it and offer a highly theoretical spiritual-scientific interpretation of its classifications, Coleridge creates tension between the ambiguous poem and the unambiguous-but-ridiculous notes, exposing a gulf between the "old" poem and the "new" attempt to understand it. The message would be that, though certain moral lessons from the past are still comprehensible--"he liveth best who loveth best" is not hard to understand-- other aspects of its narratives are less easily grasped.

In any event, this first segment of the poem takes the Mariner through the worst of his trials and shows, in action, the lesson that will be explicitly articulated in the second segment. The Mariner kills the Albatross in bad faith, subjecting himself to the hostility of the forces that govern the universe (the very un-Christian-seeming spirit beneath the sea and the horrible Life-in-Death). It is unclear how these forces are meant to relate to one another--whether the Life-in-Death is in league with the submerged spirit or whether their simultaneous appearance is simply a coincidence.

After earning his curse, the Mariner is able to gain access to the favor of God--able to regain his ability to pray--only by realizing that the monsters around him are beautiful in God's eyes and that he should love them as he should have loved the Albatross. In the final three books of the poem, the Mariner's encounter with a Hermit will spell out this message explicitly, and the reader will learn why the Mariner has stopped the Wedding-Guest to tell him this story.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Parts V-VII

Summary

The Mariner continues telling his story to the Wedding-Guest. Free of the curse of the Albatross, the Mariner was able to sleep, and as he did so, the rains came, drenching him. The moon broke through the clouds, and a host of spirits entered the dead men's bodies, which began to move about and perform their old sailors' tasks. The ship was propelled forward as the Mariner joined in the work. The Wedding-Guest declares again that he is afraid of the Mariner, but the Mariner tells him that the men's bodies were inhabited by blessed spirits, not cursed souls. At dawn, the bodies clustered around the mast, and sweet sounds rose up from their mouths--the sounds of the spirits leaving their bodies. The spirits flew around the ship, singing. The ship continued to surge forward until noon, driven by the spirit from the land of mist and snow, nine fathoms deep in the sea. At noon, however, the ship stopped, then began to move backward and forward as if it were trapped in a tug of war. Finally, it broke free, and the Mariner fell to the deck with the jolt of sudden acceleration. He heard two disembodied voices in the air; one asked if he was the man who had killed the Albatross, and the other declared softly that he had done penance for his crime and would do more penance before all was rectified.

In dialogue, the two voices discussed the situation. The moon overpowered the sea, they said, and enabled the ship to move; an angelic power moved the ship northward at an astonishingly rapid pace. When the Mariner awoke from his trance, he saw the dead men standing together, looking at him. But a breeze rose up and propelled the ship back to its native country, back to the Mariner's home; he recognized the kirk, the hill, and the lighthouse. As they neared the bay, seraphs--figures made of pure light--stepped out of the corpses of the sailors, which fell to the deck. Each seraph waved at the Mariner, who was powerfully moved. Soon, he heard the sound of oars; the Pilot, the Pilot's son, and the holy Hermit were rowing out toward him. The Mariner hoped that the Hermit could shrive (absolve) him of his sin, washing the blood of the Albatross off his soul.

The Hermit, a holy man who lived in the woods and loved to talk to mariners from strange lands, had encouraged the Pilot and his son not to be afraid and to row out to the ship. But as they reached the Mariner's ship, it sank in a sudden whirlpool, leaving the Mariner afloat and the Pilot's rowboat spinning in the wake. The Mariner was loaded aboard the Pilot's ship, and the Pilot's boy, mad with terror, laughed hysterically and declared that the devil knows how to row. On land, the Mariner begged the Hermit to shrive him, and the Hermit bade the Mariner tell his tale. Once it was told, the Mariner was free from the agony of his guilt. However, the guilt returned over time and persisted until the Mariner traveled to a new place and told his tale again. The moment he comes upon the man to whom he is destined to tell his tale, he knows it, and he has no choice but to relate the story then and there to his appointed audience; the Wedding-Guest is one such person.

The church doors burst open, and the wedding party streams outside. The Mariner declares to the Wedding-Guest that he who loves all God's creatures leads a happier, better life; he then takes his leave. The Wedding-Guest walks away from the party, stunned, and awakes the next morning "a sadder and a wiser man."

Form

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is written in loose, short ballad stanzas usually either four or six lines long but occasionally as many as nine lines long. The meter is also somewhat loose, but odd lines are generally tetrameter, while even lines are generally trimeter. (There are exceptions: In a five-line stanza, for instance, lines one, three, and four are likely to have four accented syllables--tetrameter--while lines two and five have three accented syllables.) The rhymes generally alternate in an ABAB or ABABAB scheme, though there are again many exceptions; the nine-line stanza in Part III, for instance, rhymes AABCCBDDDB. Many stanzas include couplets in this way--five-line stanzas, for example, are rhymed ABCCB, often with an internal rhyme in the first line, or ABAAB, without the internal rhyme.

Commentary

This second segment of the "Rime" concludes the Mariner's narrative; here he meets the host of seraph-like spirits who (rather grotesquely) rescue his ship by entering the corpses of the fallen sailors, and it is here that he earns his moral salvation through his confession to the Hermit and the subsequent confessions he must continue to make throughout his life--including this one, to the Wedding-Guest. This second segment lacks much of the bizarre imagistic intensity found in the first section, and the supernatural powers even begin to seem sympathetic (the submerged spirit from the land of mist and snow is now called "the lonesome spirit" in a side note). The more gruesome elements still surface occasionally, however; the sinking of the ship and the insanity of the Pilot's son could have come from a dramatic, gritty tale such as *Moby-Dick*, and the seraphs of the previous scene evoke such fantastical works as *Paradise Lost*.

The figurative arrangement of this poem is complicated: one speaker pronounces judgments like "A sadder and a wiser man / He rose the morrow morn"; the side notes are presumably written by a scholar, separate from this first speaker; independent of these two voices is the Mariner, whose words make up most of the poem; the Wedding-Guest also speaks directly. Moreover, the various time frames combine rather intricately. Coleridge adds to this complexity at the start of Part VI, when he introduces a short dramatic dialogue to indicate the conversation between the two disembodied voices. This technique, again, influenced later writers, such as Melville, who often used dramatic dialogues in his equally complicated tale of the sea, *Moby-Dick*. Here in Coleridge's poem, this dialogue plunges the reader suddenly into the role of the Mariner, hearing the voices around him rather than simply hearing them described. Disorienting techniques such as this one are used throughout the "Rime" to ensure that the poem never becomes too abstract in its interplay between side notes and verse; thus, however theoretical the level of the poem's operation, its story remains compelling.

(adapted from www.sparknotes.com)