

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

By Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Study Guide Notes

By Mark Clark

Background (for teachers)

My name is Mark Clark. I am currently a Drama and English teacher at Colo High School in Sydney's north-west.

I studied 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' when I was at school in the 1970's. It really captured my imagination and I vowed, one day, to put it to music. In finally doing so, I have tried to capture the essence of each section as the 'feel' of the poem changes. I ended up with nineteen sections, including three repeated melodies. In live performance what you will hear is a slightly abridged version of the CD I have produced. All of the instrumentation and some sections of female voice are used to back me up as I sing and play acoustic guitar.

My intention is to provide you with a decent stimulus; to provide a useful class resource and to provide you with a good unit of related ideas for the poem.

The overall structure of the poem

The poem is divided into seven parts. The poem is made up of four, five and six-line stanzas with the exception of one nine-line stanza in Part III.

There is some variation in the rhythm and rhyme schemes but in general-

The four-line stanzas are:	line 1	4 beats	A
	line 2	3 beats	B
	line 3	4 beats	C
	line 4	3 beats	B

The five-line stanzas are:	line 1	4 beats	A
	line 2	3 beats	B
	line 3	3 beats	C
	line 4	3 beats	C
	line 5	3 beats	B

The six-line stanzas are:	line 1	4 beats	A
	line 2	3 beats	B
	line 3	4 beats	C
	line 4	3 beats	B
	line 5	4 beats	D
	line 6	3 beats	B

This regularity gives the poem a mesmerising quality and this regularity was one of the reasons it works so well as a song lyric.

In terms of the length of each Part-

Part I	20 stanzas	
Part II	14 stanzas	
Part III	17 stanzas	
Part IV	15 stanzas	142 stanzas in all
Part V	26 stanzas	
Part VI	25 stanzas	
Part VII	25 stanzas	

- Find out what you can about **iambic pentameter**.

Part I

Note the use of a narrator. This device allows an overview of the meeting between the wedding guest and the mariner. The narrator speaks at various times throughout the poem and can describe events that the ancient mariner cannot himself describe. So the scene is set by the narrator and ultimately, it is the narrator who concludes the poem and gives a final commentary.

In the opening five stanzas the use of tense is interesting because it shifts seamlessly from present tense into past tense. Opening with the present tense gives a sense of immediacy: 'It **is** an ancient mariner' but very quickly by stanza three the shift to past tense begins: 'He **holds** him...' **but** '...his hand **dropped** he'.) The transition is complete by stanza five and we are in the past tense for the beginning of the mariner's tale.

The use of present tense gives the reader or listener the sense that the action is occurring now- at this moment. Coleridge opens the poem in the present tense at the moment of greatest interest- there is no preamble. We, as an audience, are arrested as suddenly as the wedding guest. By the sixth stanza the mariner has launched into his tale and we are taken from the terrestrial stone upon which the wedding guest sits, into the aquatic world within which almost the entire poem will take place.

- Can we make any judgement about the possible character of the wedding guest from the few words that he speaks? Why is *he* the one to whom the mariner must tell his 'ghastly tale'?

The world of the mariner's story grows rapidly. Coleridge takes us from the harbour, out to sea and beneath the sun within two and a half stanzas. Note the brilliant description of the ship's departure. The land *does* appear to dip below the horizon when on a boat or ship as one leaves the land. Note also that we are given the ship's direction, south, because the sun rises upon the left- so our orientation is clear. It is clever writing to understate such an important detail, although he does state directly that the ship is heading south several stanzas later (for those who missed it). Note also that the sun rises higher and higher until it is '...over the mast at noon', at which point the ship has reached the equator.

So, the tale begins, only to be briefly interrupted two and half stanzas later, as we are transported back to the wedding and the poor old wedding guest, once again by the device of the narrator. It is as if the audience is momentarily jerked out of the story and back to reality. As if we, like the wedding guest, are mesmerised by the tale, only to be brought back to reality and then, just as quickly, thrown back into the world of the mariner's imagination. The spell is on the reader too.

Beautiful personification as the storm blast chases the ship and then the only variation on the four line stanzas of Part I where Coleridge uses the six-line stanza to liken the storm to a pursuing foe. The extra use of rhyme and additional two lines heightens the sense of urgency and movement.

The poet engages our senses to create the world of imagination from the visual beauty of:
 ‘And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
 As green as emerald’

with its lovely internal rhyme, to the aural, dangerous beauty of:

‘It cracked and growled and roared and howled
 Like noises in a swound’

with its onomatopoeic resonance and myriad use of the conjunction ‘and’ to highlight the extent of the danger.

- Note that the albatross is hailed as a ‘Christian soul’. This poem is a tale, which extols the virtues of Christian morality. This theme is evident from the beginning in the initial setting by the kirk (the church) and the joyous celebration of Christian love, which is formalised in the Christian wedding ceremony.

In real terms, the albatross is only ‘alive’ in the poem for the last five stanzas of Part I. There is no description offered of its appearance. As a character in the story, it is not developed. Its sole function is to serve as a prime mover for the mariner’s woes and for the tale we are hearing. We are not even told what drives the mariner to kill the bird. He offers no reason to the wedding guest. It is enough that the deed is committed. We realise that this action is the reason why the mariner is imparting his tale, although as yet, we do not know of the consequences that this action will bring.

If we look at the last five stanzas of Part I, we notice that while the albatross was around, although the ship was in some peril from the ice, the helmsman steered them through, well enough, which suggests good fortune is attached to the bird’s presence. Notice how Coleridge builds up the positive aspects of the situation in this section. He builds up the notion that the mariners fed and cared for the albatross but ends the second last stanza with the ominous:

‘Glimmered the white moon-shine’.

At the end of Part I the wedding guest brings us back to reality. His lack of understanding as to why the mariner is haunted mimics our own. The wedding guest asks the question that the audience wants answered:

‘Why look’st thou so?’

In other words ‘What is the matter?’ The wedding guest has seen the anguished expression on the mariner’s face as he recollects the action that changed this life. The mariner replies:

‘With my crossbow
 I shot the albatross.’

So, Part I has swiftly moved us from the scene of a wedding, out of the harbour, through a storm, through ice-fields near the South Pole, to an act of malice at sea,