

Rime of the Ancient Mariner Full Poem Discussion Questions

1. If this is a poem which is in part about guilt and expiation, what's the crime? What does it mean to kill an albatross? You might consider:
 - a. the description of the albatross itself, lines 63-79
 - b. the mariner's motives for killing the albatross
 - c. the state that follows from the killing of the albatross, 115-142, 171-198, 232-248
 - d. what it takes to begin to break the spell, 272-291
 - e. where are the mariners going in the first place? Why?
 2. If the mariner is a poet-figure (a significant "if," here), then what is a poet, for Coleridge? What do poems and poets do? Consider:
 - a. the description of the mariner in the opening frame
 - b. the odd mixture of genres in the poem--a ballad with a Latin epigraph and the marginal glosses of a religious text
 - c. the overall narrative of what happens to the mariner (loss of community, whatever the albatross means, isolation, redemption, the compulsion to tell the tale, etc.)
 - d. the nature of the mariner/poet's penance, 570-609; the mariner returns home, but has he become a part of the community?
 - e. the poet/mariner's effect on his audience, the Wedding-Guest (opening and closing frame)
 - f. the "moral to the story" as the mariner sets it out, 610-617. Does this moral do justice to the mariner's tale? If so, how? If not, what's the point?
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1. Consider the speaker and the tale? Who tells the tale? What significance does the nature of the tale's audience have? In the early sections of the poem, what is the nature of the description? Is it naturalistic? eerie? How is the albatross described?
2. Why does the mariner stop "one of three"—in other words, that particular Wedding Guest? Why is it important that the Wedding Guest be prevented from attending the wedding?
3. What does the moon-sun/night/day have to do with the story?
4. What is the relationship between the bird and the mariners at the beginning of the story?
5. Why does the mariner shoot the albatross? Is his act premeditated? Is it caused in any way?
6. What is the connection between the mariner's inability to speak and then his inability to pray?
7. What does the act of rolling dice to determine fate mean about the nature of justice in the Mariner's universe? Why do the mariners suffer as well?
8. What symbolic implications do you see in the motif of the voyage? How is this connected to your own lives?

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9. Why do the men die again? Did they ever change? What has happened to the curse? Has it gone away?

10. What is the role of religion in the mariner's thoughts and actions? How does the mariner's character affect the way he tells the tale? Do the cause-effect relationships within the poem indicate a rational, moral universe? How is the mariner's fate decided?

11. Consider the nature of hospitality and community in this poem? How does the gloss give the illusion of making a rational comment on the events of the poem? Consider the themes of alienation, isolation, and community.

12. What has the Wedding Guest learned? Why is he now a "sadder, but wiser" man?

13. Look at the relationship between confession, dead men, and guilt. What is the dynamic here?

14. Explain in Part III the connection between the sighting of the ship and the Mariner biting his arm and sucking his blood that he might cry aloud and the scene of the crew members all drinking their blood and shouting with joy.

15. What is the significance of what occurs next? How do you account for the paralyzing horror as the ship passes before the setting sun? Where did the spectre Woman, Life-in-Death come from? What might she symbolize?

16. Freudian interpretation can offer some explanations, particularly about the water snakes. Explain.

17. Death seems to mimic the living in this poem. Cite a few instances.

18. How reliable is the narrator of the tale? How many times have you read and heard this tale? Does this repetition aid in the impact of the poem? Is the mariner still under a spell at the end of the poem? Are we, his auditors, also?

19. Wordsworth, Coleridge's friend and fellow poet, retraces through his memory of childhood, "The Growth of a Poet's Mind" and frets about the deceptions of memory and the changes of self:

*The vacancy between me and those days
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being. (2.29-33)*

The I'autre, or the Other, or a divided self seems at work in the Rime. Explore some possibilities.

20. This poem is like a dream sequence. How? What does this poem suggest about the nature of evil in the universe?