

# “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

## Reading Guide

In our study of Coleridge’s poem, you will complete two tasks. The first is to take notes and to answer the list of questions provided **on the back** of this sheet. These questions are designed to guide your comprehension; the poem is long and complex, and they will help you focus on key elements needed to understand the plot. **Take notes and record answers in the margins of your copy of the poem.**

## Getting Started...

Listed below are suggestions for margin notes/annotations.

- Actively paraphrase ideas and note significances in the margins.
- Remember this selection is both a poem AND a narrative (story). Though Coleridge uses the poetic form, he is still concerned principally with telling a fantastic story.
- The mariner’s tale, told in the first-person, is set inside a third-person **frame narrative** about a wedding. Observe how the poet uses the first person narrative voice to make the tale more vivid and moving. This juxtaposition can sometimes be confusing!
- Examine the ideas of **crime** and **punishment** in the poem and the poet’s attitude to the **natural world**.
- Note the effect of the poem’s strange, uncanny or **Gothic** elements. Gothic horror fiction was popular when Coleridge wrote this poem, and scholars say it influenced Shelley’s vision in *Frankenstein*. It is directly referenced in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.
- The imagery is vivid as the poet describes some spectacular scenes. These are often memorable in themselves but also symbolize something else, for the people in the poem as much as the reader. Watch for such instances.
- The poet uses effects of rhyme, alliteration, and other sound effects. Note how these are used by Coleridge to reinforce ideas.
- Circle and concisely define in the margins any vocabulary you cannot decipher in context

Coleridge uses many regional terms and archaic spellings, something he was criticized for even at the time of first publication. He admittedly attempted to model the style of the Old English ballad, though many initial readers thought he took this too far. This complaint was redressed in subsequent additions of the poem by eliminating or rephrasing certain words, albeit without total sacrifice of his aim to create something that sounded old.

### ★ For the Curious

This is a dramatic poem, excellent for reading aloud, or even setting to music, as one heavy metal group did. Listen to the metal epic “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Iron Maiden (*Powerslave*, 1984). Did they capture the essence of the poem?

## 1 Reading Comprehension Questions

As we read, answer the following questions on your copy of the poem.

### PART 1

1. Why does the Mariner stop “one of three”—in other words, that particular wedding guest?
2. How does the Mariner manage to get the wedding guest to listen?
3. How does the mood or tone shift with the change in setting? (from Equator to South Pole?)
4. Why do the mariners hail the bird as a Christian soul?
5. How does the bird relate to the mariners?

### PART 2

6. Why does the Mariner shoot the albatross? Is his act premeditated?
7. Why do the mariners change their minds about the bird’s value?
8. What does the Mariner’s not being able to speak signify?
9. Why does the crew hang the albatross around the Mariner’s neck?

### PART 3

10. What does the mariner see? Who is on it? Is it real?
11. What is weird about the oncoming ship?
12. How is the mariner able to regain his speech?
13. Why does everyone die but the mariner? Why are their deaths compared to “the whiz of my crossbow”?
14. What does each crew member do before falling down dead?

### PART 4

15. Why can’t the mariner pray?
16. How do the dead men disturb the mariner?
17. Why does a spring of love gush from his heart?
18. Why can he now pray?
19. Why does the bird fall off his neck?

### PART 5

20. Why does the Mariner feel like a ghost?
21. Why do the men arise from the dead? Who are they?
22. What does the spirit’s loving the bird who loved the man have to do with anything?
23. What is determined of the Mariner’s fate?
24. Why is the wedding guest afraid of the mariner?

### PART 6

25. What happens to the Mariner’s ability to pray?
26. What happens to the corpses on deck?
27. What does the Mariner want the Hermit to do for him?

### PART 7

28. What happens to the ship?
29. What happens when the Mariner tells his tale?
30. What lesson does the Mariner teach the wedding guest?

## 2 Group Analysis

Your second task is to devise an analysis of the poem. Working in groups of 3 or 4, you will identify **examples** of the following devices in the poem. You will plot your examples on an albatross that you create with butcher paper. All quotes must be cited in **MLA format**.

- Sound (alliteration, assonance, consonance)
- Imagery (sight, smell, taste, touch, sound)
- Archaic diction
- Simile
- Onomatopoeia
- Hyperbole
- Personification
- Symbolism
- Theme