UNIT 6: SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Reading the Poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

- 6.3.1 The Texts of the Poems
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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and justify its importance as a 'nature poem'
- identify the major themes prevalent in the poem and assess their implications
- discuss the relationship between Coleridge the critic and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
- read the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as an important contribution to English Romanticism

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will get an opportunity to read about the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this poem, an old sailor or Mariner narrates the horrible sequence of events, which followed after he had shot an albatross during his trip through the sea. His ship was becalmed; he became subjected to nightmarish

visions and to an extended period of suffering. Even his water supply ran out in punishment for his deed. However, when the Mariner blesses some sea-creatures, his offence against the power of nature, supposedly caused by the killing of the bird, was forgiven, and he is able to return home becoming a wiser man through his suffering. You should notice that the whole poem is written in the form of a Medieval ballad. After you finish reading this unit, you will understand that this poem is an excellent example of Coleridge's nature poetry.

6.3 READING THE POEM "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER"

6.3.1 The Texts of the Poems

It is assumed that Wordsworth and Coleridge jointly discussed the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" during its initial stage and Wordsworth might have suggested one or two ideas or even wrote one or two phrases for the poem. However, in no way the poem can be seen as a joint venture of the two poets. It is also because the kind of nightmarish world that Coleridge portrayed in the poem was foreign to Wordsworth who instead recorded in some early criticism of Coleridge that he could not understand the poem at all. However, the poem continued to remain in the successive editions of *Lyrical Ballads* although his *Christabel* was eventually dropped. Perhaps Wordsworth could not really understand the role of the conscious mind while upholding the world of nightmare, horror. This poem invites many discussions and it is almost not possible to discuss all the aspects of this poem in this unit. So, you are advised to read some of the books mentioned in the recommended reading list.

PART I

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?
The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'sthear the merry din.'
He holds him with his skinny hand,

'There was a ship,' quoth he.
'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!'
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.
He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.
The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.
'The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top.
The Sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea.
Higher and higher every day,
Till over the mast at noon—'
The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,
For he heard the loud bassoon.
The bride hath paced into the hall,
Red as a rose is she;
Nodding their heads before her goes
The merry minstrelsy.
The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,
Yet he cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.
And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased us south along.
With sloping masts and dipping prow,
As who pursued with yell and blow
Still treads the shadow of his foe,
And forward bends his head,
The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,
And southward aye we fled.
And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.
And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—
The ice was all between.
The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!
At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.
It ate the food it ne'er had eat,
And round and round it flew.
The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
The helmsman steered us through!
And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the Mariner's hollo!
In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,
It perched for vespers nine;
Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,

Glimmered the white Moon-shine.'
'God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—
Why look'st thou so?'—With my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS.

PART II

The Sun now rose upon the right:
Out of the sea came he,
Still hid in mist, and on the left
Went down into the sea.
And the good south wind still blew behind,
But no sweet bird did follow,
Nor any day for food or play
Came to the Mariner's hollo!
And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow!
Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,
The glorious Sun uprist:
Then all averred, I had killed the bird
That brought the fog and mist.
'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
That bring the fog and mist.
The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.
Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!
All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.
Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.
Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.
The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.
About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.
And some in dreams assurèd were
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow.
And every tongue, through utter drought,
Was withered at the root;
We could not speak, no more than if
We had been choked with soot.
Ah! well a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.

PART III

There passed a weary time. Each throat
Was parched, and glazed each eye.
A weary time! a weary time!
How glazed each weary eye,
When looking westward, I beheld
A something in the sky.
At first it seemed a little speck,
And then it seemed a mist;
It moved and moved, and took at last
A certain shape, I wist.
A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!
And still it neared and neared:
As if it dodged a water-sprite,
It plunged and tacked and veered.
With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
We could nor laugh nor wail;
Through utter drought all dumb we stood!
I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,
And cried, A sail! a sail!
With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
Agape they heard me call:
Gramercy! they for joy did grin,
And all at once their breath drew in.
As they were drinking all.
See! see! (I cried) she tacks no more!
Hither to work us weal;
Without a breeze, without a tide,
She steadies with upright keel!
The western wave was all a-flame.
The day was well nigh done!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright Sun;
When that strange shape drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the Sun.
And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)
As if through a dungeon-grate he peered
With broad and burning face.
Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)
How fast she nears and nears!
Are those *her* sails that glance in the Sun,
Like restless gossameres?
Are those her *ribs* through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that woman's mate?
Her lips were red, *her* looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.
The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice;
'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.
The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out;
At one stride comes the dark;
With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,
Off shot the spectre-bark.
We listened and looked sideways up!
Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
My life-blood seemed to sip!
The stars were dim, and thick the night,
The steersman's face by his lamp gleamed white;
From the sails the dew did drip—

Till clomb above the eastern bar
The hornèd Moon, with one bright star
Within the nether tip.
One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,
Too quick for groan or sigh,
Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
And cursed me with his eye.
Four times fifty living men,
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
They dropped down one by one.
The souls did from their bodies fly,—
They fled to bliss or woe!
And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my cross-bow!

PART IV

'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!
I fear thy skinny hand!
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribbed sea-sand.
I fear thee and thy glittering eye,
And thy skinny hand, so brown.'—
Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest!
This body dropt not down.
Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.
The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,
And drew my eyes away;
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay.
I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.
I closed my lids, and kept them close,
And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay dead like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet.
The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
Nor rot nor reek did they:
The look with which they looked on me
Had never passed away.
An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die.
The moving Moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside—
Her beams bemocked the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,
The charmèd water burnt always
A still and awful red.
Beyond the shadow of the ship,

I watched the water-snakes:
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.
Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.
O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessèd them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.
The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

PART V

Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!
To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.
The silly buckets on the deck,
That had so long remained,
I dreamt that they were filled with dew;
And when I awoke, it rained.
My lips were wet, my throat was cold,
My garments all were dank;
Sure I had drunken in my dreams,
And still my body drank.
I moved, and could not feel my limbs:
I was so light—almost
I thought that I had died in sleep,
And was a blessed ghost.
And soon I heard a roaring wind:
It did not come anear;
But with its sound it shook the sails,
That were so thin and sere.
The upper air burst into life!
And a hundred fire-flags sheen,
To and fro they were hurried about!
And to and fro, and in and out,
The wan stars danced between.
And the coming wind did roar more loud,
And the sails did sigh like sedge,
And the rain poured down from one black cloud;
The Moon was at its edge.
The thick black cloud was cleft, and still
The Moon was at its side:
Like waters shot from some high crag,
The lightning fell with never a jag,
A river steep and wide.
The loud wind never reached the ship,
Yet now the ship moved on!
Beneath the lightning and the Moon
The dead men gave a groan.
They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;
It had been strange, even in a dream,
To have seen those dead men rise.
The helmsman steered, the ship moved on;
Yet never a breeze up-blew;
The Mariners all 'gan work the ropes,

Where they were wont to do;
They raised their limbs like lifeless tools—
We were a ghastly crew.
The body of my brother's son
Stood by me, knee to knee:
The body and I pulled at one rope,
But he said nought to me.
'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!'
Be calm, thou Wedding-Guest!
'Twas not those souls that fled in pain,
Which to their corses came again,
But a troop of spirits blest:
For when it dawned—they dropped their arms,
And clustered round the mast;
Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,
And from their bodies passed.
Around, around, flew each sweet sound,
Then darted to the Sun;
Slowly the sounds came back again,
Now mixed, now one by one.
Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!
And now 'twas like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute;
And now it is an angel's song,
That makes the heavens be mute.
It ceased; yet still the sails made on
A pleasant noise till noon,
A noise like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.
Till noon we quietly sailed on,
Yet never a breeze did breathe:
Slowly and smoothly went the ship,
Moved onward from beneath.
Under the keel nine fathom deep,
From the land of mist and snow,
The spirit slid: and it was he
That made the ship to go.
The sails at noon left off their tune,
And the ship stood still also.
The Sun, right up above the mast,
Had fixed her to the ocean:
But in a minute she 'gan stir,
With a short uneasy motion—
Backwards and forwards half her length
With a short uneasy motion.
Then like a pawing horse let go,
She made a sudden bound:
It flung the blood into my head,
And I fell down in a swound.
How long in that same fit I lay,
I have not to declare;
But ere my living life returned,
I heard and in my soul discerned
Two voices in the air.
'Is it he?' quoth one, 'Is this the man?
By him who died on cross,
With his cruel bow he laid full low
The harmless Albatross.
The spirit who bideth by himself
In the land of mist and snow,
He loved the bird that loved the man
Who shot him with his bow.'

The other was a softer voice,
As soft as honey-dew:
Quoth he, ‘The man hath penance done,
And penance more will do.’
‘But tell me, tell me! speak again,
Thy soft response renewing—
What makes that ship drive on so fast?
What is the ocean doing?’
‘Still as a slave before his lord,
The ocean hath no blast;
His great bright eye most silently
Up to the Moon is cast—
If he may know which way to go;
For she guides him smooth or grim.
See, brother, see! how graciously
She looketh down on him.’
‘But why drives on that ship so fast,
Without or wave or wind?’
‘The air is cut away before,
And closes from behind.
Fly, brother, fly! more high, more high!
Or we shall be belated:
For slow and slow that ship will go,
When the Mariner’s trance is abated.’
I woke, and we were sailing on
As in a gentle weather:
’Twas night, calm night, the moon was high;
The dead men stood together.
All stood together on the deck,
For a charnel-dungeon fitter:
All fixed on me their stony eyes,
That in the Moon did glitter.
The pang, the curse, with which they died,
Had never passed away:
I could not draw my eyes from theirs,
Nor turn them up to pray.
And now this spell was snapt: once more
I viewed the ocean green,
And looked far forth, yet little saw
Of what had else been seen—
Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.
But soon there breathed a wind on me,
Nor sound nor motion made:
Its path was not upon the sea,
In ripple or in shade.
It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
Like a meadow-gale of spring—
It mingled strangely with my fears,
Yet it felt like a welcoming.
Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship,
Yet she sailed softly too:
Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze—
On me alone it blew.
Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
The light-house top I see?
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
Is this mine own countree?
We drifted o’er the harbour-bar,
And I with sobs did pray—
O let me be awake, my God!
Or let me sleep alway.
The harbour-bay was clear as glass,
So smoothly it was strewn!

And on the bay the moonlight lay,
And the shadow of the Moon.
The rock shone bright, the kirk no less,
That stands above the rock:
The moonlight steeped in silentness
The steady weathercock.
And the bay was white with silent light,
Till rising from the same,
Full many shapes, that shadows were,
In crimson colours came.
A little distance from the prow
Those crimson shadows were:
I turned my eyes upon the deck—
Oh, Christ! what saw I there!
Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,
And, by the holy rood!
A man all light, a seraph-man,
On every corse there stood.
This seraph-band, each waved his hand:
It was a heavenly sight!
They stood as signals to the land,
Each one a lovely light;
This seraph-band, each waved his hand,
No voice did they impart—
No voice; but oh! the silence sank
Like music on my heart.
But soon I heard the dash of oars,
I heard the Pilot's cheer;
My head was turned perforce away
And I saw a boat appear.
The Pilot and the Pilot's boy,
I heard them coming fast:
Dear Lord in Heaven! it was a joy
The dead men could not blast.
I saw a third—I heard his voice:
It is the Hermit good!
He singeth loud his godly hymns
That he makes in the wood.
He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away
The Albatross's blood.

PART VII

This Hermit good lives in that wood
Which slopes down to the sea.
How loudly his sweet voice he rears!
He loves to talk with Marineres
That come from a far countree.
He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve—
He hath a cushion plump:
It is the moss that wholly hides
The rotted old oak-stump.
The skiff-boat neared: I heard them talk,
'Why, this is strange, I trow!
Where are those lights so many and fair,
That signal made but now?'
'Strange, by my faith!' the Hermit said—
'And they answered not our cheer!
The planks looked warped! and see those sails,
How thin they are and sere!
I never saw aught like to them,
Unless perchance it were
Brown skeletons of leaves that lag
My forest-brook along;
When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow,
And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,
That eats the she-wolf's young.'
'Dear Lord! it hath a fiendish look—

(The Pilot made reply)
I am a-feared'—'Push on, push on!'
Said the Hermit cheerily.
The boat came closer to the ship,
But I nor spake nor stirred;
The boat came close beneath the ship,
And straight a sound was heard.
Under the water it rumbled on,
Still louder and more dread:
It reached the ship, it split the bay;
The ship went down like lead.
Stunned by that loud and dreadful sound,
Which sky and ocean smote,
Like one that hath been seven days drowned
My body lay afloat;
But swift as dreams, myself I found
Within the Pilot's boat.
Upon the whirl, where sank the ship,
The boat spun round and round;
And all was still, save that the hill
Was telling of the sound.
I moved my lips—the Pilot shrieked
And fell down in a fit;
The holy Hermit raised his eyes,
And prayed where he did sit.
I took the oars: the Pilot's boy,
Who now doth crazy go,
Laughed loud and long, and all the while
His eyes went to and fro.
'Ha! ha!' quoth he, 'full plain I see,
The Devil knows how to row.'
And now, all in my own countree,
I stood on the firm land!
The Hermit stepped forth from the boat,
And scarcely he could stand.
'O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!'
The Hermit crossed his brow.
'Say quick,' quoth he, 'I bid thee say—
What manner of man art thou?'
Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale;
And then it left me free.
Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.
I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.
What loud uproar bursts from that door!
The wedding-guests are there:
But in the garden-bower the bride
And bride-maids singing are:
And hark the little vesper bell,
Which biddeth me to prayer!
O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
Alone on a wide wide sea:
So lonely 'twas, that God himself
Scarce seemed there to be.
O sweeter than the marriage-feast,
'Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk
With a goodly company!—
To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,

While each to his great Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends
And youths and maidens gay!
Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.
The Mariner, whose eye is bright,
Whose beard with age is hoar,
Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest
Turned from the bridegroom's door.
He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.

In the winter of 1797-1798, Coleridge was living at a little village called Nether Stowey, at the foot of the Quantock Hills, about forty miles from Bristol. In the same neighbourhood at Alfoxden were also living Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. Very often Wordsworth and Coleridge took long country walks, and they were under the strong, sweet influence of Dorothy Wordsworth. In November 1797, the three set off on a late hour, intending to meet the expenses of their journey by a poem to be composed jointly by the two poets. However, unfortunately, the scheme broke down, and Wordsworth's contribution was confined to half a dozen lines, and one or two suggestions. When first printed, this poem was introduced by the following ARGUMENT.

"How a ship having passed the Line, was driven by storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole ; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical latitude of the great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancient Mariner came back to his own Country."

Therefore, the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (originally *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*) comprises seven parts and is often considered to be a signal shift in British Romantic literature. The following is an attempt at reading the poem in some detail.

Part I of the poem begins with an intense drama and mystery when the Mariner, a weird and almost a supernatural

figure, intrudes upon the everyday world of celebration and catches the hand of the wedding guest with his 'glittering eye' and 'skinny hand'. He is obsessively determined to tell 'his' story—'"There was a ship", quoth he' and although the wedding guest protests, he finally conforms to the hypnotic power of the eyes of the Mariner. As the following lines, suggest:

"He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.
The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;" (**Lines** 13-18)

However, the Mariner begins his tale in a carefree manner, which suggests the everyday, carefree world of the time in which the Mariner started his journey.

"The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top." (**Lines** 21-24)

Although for a time, the ordinary world can still be heard as we find in lines 31-40, once the ship moves South to the equator, the story of the Mariner receives new momentum. Storms blow the ship to the Antarctic, which has been evoked by Coleridge with extraordinary vividness. The beauty and terror of the polar region, the sight and sound of the ice are described in telling details causing surprise in our minds as to how Coleridge could conjure up such vivid description of places in this poem. Now the albatross, a large arctic bird prone to follow ships, seems like a common companion to the crewmembers of the ship. There is a sense of relief with the ice splitting and the unnatural atmosphere being broken by the friendliness of the albatross. However, a sudden dramatic change in the final verse of the first part of the

poem comes through the fateful act of killing the albatross by the Mariner.

"God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—
Why look'st thou so?'—with my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS." (**Lines** 79-82)

Part II begins with the sudden change of direction in the story, which the act of killing of the bird provides. Soon we realise that the ship is sailing North before a South wind towards the Pacific Ocean. In two long stanzas, the poet tells us the vacillating opinions of the crew on the Mariner's act of killing the albatross, judging it purely based on external circumstances without any serious consideration of rightness or wrongness.

"And I had done a hellish thing,`
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow! (**Lines** 91-96)
Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,
The glorious Sun uprist:
Then all averred, I had killed the bird
That brought the fog and mist.
'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
That bring the fog and mist." (**Lines** 97-102)

Coleridge's beautiful use of language is explicit in the next verses that follow. From lines 103 to 110, we see how the ship suddenly comes to a standstill like the breeze itself.

"The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea." (**Lines** 103-106)

The verses that follow emphasise the conditions of lifeless stillness, the pitiless paradox of undrinkable waters and moisture drawn even out of the ship's timber. There is an atmospheric change with the sky being 'hot and copper', the sun being no longer glorious but bloody, and the sea being rotten and slimy. There is indeed something intensely nightmarish about the fire dancing on the oily surface of the sea, which helps in pervading the sense of horror intended by the poet.

"About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white." **(Lines** 127-130**)**

Then, for the first time, we hear of the polar spirit who will reappear in part five of the poem. Many of the sailors deem it to be responsible for their horrifying plight.

Part III carries over the horror of stillness followed by the abrupt and supernatural halt of the ship in the midst of seawater. A fear is born in the minds of the sailors out of the realisation that the ship has been unaided by sea wind and that the tide is reinforced by a nightmarish image of a skeleton ship through which the sun glares as though through prison bars. As the ship draws nears them, the Mariner undergoes a sense of confusion and uncertainty. He perceives the figure of DEATH and with him a woman whose colour and beauty becoming chillingly lurid.

"*Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold." (**Lines** 190-194)

The scene is followed by a dice game between "Death" and "Life in Death" for the possession of the Mariner. However, the suddenness and swiftness with which the sun gives way to

darkness helps the skeleton ship to disappear. The fear of the supernatural is once again reinforced by the dimness of the stars, the thick darkness, the eerie lamp on the steer man's face and the appearance of the moon. Coleridge knew that there are spots of light on the darkened surface of the crescent moon, but for the sailors there was an old superstition that a 'star gogged moon' boded ill. The death of the crew provides the horrible experience to the Mariner as every single death reminds him of his first impious act. For this, read the following stanzas:

"Four times fifty living men,
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
They dropped down one by one.
The souls did from their bodies fly,—
They fled to bliss or woe!
And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my cross-bow!" (**Lines** 216-223)

Part IV begins with the voice of the wedding guest who suddenly breaks the spell by voicing the following lines:

"I fear thee, ancient Mariner!
I fear thy skinny hand!
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribbed sea-sand.
I fear thee and thy glittering eye,
And thy skinny hand, so brown.—
Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest!
This body dropt not down." (**Lines** 224-231)

However, the Mariner assures him that he will not cause him any harm as he is not a Ghost, and since Death did not possess him it is only ''Life in Death'' which has made him what he is. The Mariner starts feeling guilty for the death of 'many men so beautiful and identifies himself with slime and rottenness. In a

number of beautifully written stanzas, the poet conjures up the hell-like suffering that the Mariner undergoes.

Whereas in **Part IV** there was an intimate psychological relationship between the Mariner and his surroundings, in this **Part V** the Mariner just remains a detached onlooker of nature's fury. The sudden storm that is blowing is exciting and invigorating, full of precise details. This exemplifies Coleridge's careful handling of the senses of sight and hearing. Although the sound of the storm itself is enough to make the ship tremble, it is quite away from the Mariner and his ship. Yet, the storm, much supernaturally, triggers off the rising up of the dead men. Thus, also begins the homeward journey of the ship. The Mariner raises the dead men, which symbolically suggests the lifting of the curse and the beginning of the restoration of the Mariner to some sort of society, as the following lines suggest:

"The body of my brother's son
Stood by me, knee to knee:
The body and I pulled at one rope,
But he said nought to me." (**Lines** 341-344)

Therefore, we find in this section, after the tropical hell, the prevailing temperate climate of spiritual refreshment. However, the elements of the Supernatural remain to be complicated. The Polar spirit apparently directs the ship's movement but the Mariner faints and hears spirit voices stating that his penance for the act of killing the albatross is not yet over.

In **Part VI**, the spirit voices seem to have continued its supernatural influence over the ship's journey. But the breaking of the curse is finely documented by the poet as the Mariner is first held by the gaze of the dead man who "neither spake nor moved their eyes", then his release and fear to look back at his erstwhile companions, finally the receiving of spiritual regeneration from the fresh breeze blowing. The entire part of the poem culminates in the emotion of the return.

"Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
The light-house top I see?
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
Is this mine own countree?"
"We drifted o'er the harbour-bar,
And I with sobs did pray—
O let me be awake, my God!
Or let me sleep always." (**Lines** 464-471)

Part VII The portrayal of the character of the hermit along with the Pilot and the Pilot's boy by the poet is a very effective device for bringing us back to the world we are used to inhabit. His conversations in the boat relate the Mariner's ship to images of menace in the natural world. To the 'superstitious' Pilot, the ship 'hath a fiendish look' and when the ship sinks and the Mariner is rescued, the Pilot's boy goes insane. Even the hermit finds it difficult to resist the ghastly power of the Mariner. Although the Mariner's desperate request for absolution (forgiveness for a person's sin) is not met with, the hermit does release him from his agony by urging him to tell the story. In addition, subsequently, the Mariner must at intervals keep retelling his story:

"Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.
I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach." (**Lines** 582-590)

Thus, the poem ends with a return to the wedding guest. But the Mariner's tale will live on.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: How did Coleridge and Wordsworth conceive the idea of the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"?

Q 5: What is the significance of Part V of the poem?

6.3.3 Major Themes

The following are some of the important thematic aspects of the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

Autobiographical Impulse:

It is quite possible to argue that the poem "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" is in some sense an autobiographical poem. Though there is no hint of the purpose of the voyage, it does bear many resemblances with the voyages undertaken in the 16th century as the line suggests: "We were the first that ever burst/ Into that silent sea". So, the voyage undertaken by the Mariner may be seen as an intellectual discovery as experienced by Coleridge himself. It is also suggested that Coleridge, through his essential passivity, aggravated by his indolence and opium eating, 'shot the Albatross' of his creative imagination and so brought upon himself the hell of 'Life and Death". Moreover, much of the emotional and spiritual experience of the Mariner was written out of Coleridge's own experience and some of the nightmarish effects may have had their origin in his opium-addicted dreams.

Nature Poetry and Coleridge:

The poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" can be read in the context of 18th century development of the arts of landscape painting and gardening following which natural description began to be written for its own sake. It is to be mentioned that both Wordsworth and Coleridge brought a new and generally more

lasting perspective to nature poetry as they viewed nature with intensity and sensitivity. Coleridge is, in fact, an innovator in the field of poetry as he used a richly sensuous language and a form of poetry that allowed easy movement between the outer landscape of nature and the inner landscape of the mind. Such poems are often called conversational poems in that they refer to a specific time and place; often there is a specific person to whom the poet is speaking. They are written in relatively straightforward language as exemplified by the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

Moral Implications of the Poem:

The moral implications of the poem are related to the killing of the albatross. Although in the killing of the albatross the motive of the Mariner is not raised at all, it is implied that the bird was a friend to the sailors and that its killing was in some way a violation of what was due to a creature of nature. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that the killing of the albatross was not in essence different from the killing of a fellow human being. Yet, for all that, the poem actually says, the Mariner's act could have been an accidental one. Hence, we should not expect a straightforward case of crime, punishment and redemption. Secondly, there is a problem with the punishment also. We the readers are told that the punishment is brought by the Polar Spirit in vengeance for the killing of its favourite. That the Mariner should be punished is fine, but the sailors too suffer horribly and die and we cannot help feeling that the sailors are really no more than pawns in the game of vengeance against the Mariner. Thus, we are presented with a universe in which suffering is visited upon the simple and trivial acts under which human beings have almost no control. Whatever it may be, to the Mariner, love and respect for all God's creatures is a condition of spiritual well-being and kinship with his fellow humans.

Christian Elements:

The albatross which has been killed by the Mariner appears through the fog 'as if it had been a Christian soul'. Interesting to note that the Mariner's experience is tangled and bewildering. He is an outcast who witnesses an action penetrating into the physical world. Therefore, despite the framework of a Catholic Christian faith and ritual, the Marnier appears to discover a series of meanings concerning the interdependency of life. Thus, his 'discovery' is both literal and spiritual. His coming back to the place from where he started his journey requires the mechanisms of sufferings, but it is important to note that his pain is to be explored in the context of benevolence. Subsequently, the truth he realises stretch beyond more religious formulae to the consideration and affirmation of a universal harmony.

Coleridge the Critic and "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner":

The concept of Fancy and Imagination as propounded by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter 13) forms the core of Coleridge's critical ideas. Fancy merely assembles and juxtaposes images and impressions without fusing them. However, Imagination actively moulds, transforms and tried to bring into unity what it perceives. Primary Imagination is nothing less than a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I am. Through the Secondary Imagination, the mind "dissolves, diffuses and dissipates in order to recreate". The reading of the poem can be co-related to these basic critical ideas of Coleridge. Imagination need not relate to everyday world but can create its own make believe world. The world depicted in the "Ancient Mariner" is far removed from our familiar everyday world, which also brings the poem closer to another concept of Coleridge—the "willing suspension of disbelief". The reader must voluntarily suspend disbelief in order to appreciate the fantastic happenings in the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What, according to you, are some of the major themes in the poem?

Q 8: Briefly state the role played by Coleridge in the context of the 18th century nature poetry.

Q 9: In what ways can you trace the moral implication underlying the poem?

Q 10: State the basic contributions of Coleridge as a Romantic critic.

6.3.4 Coleridge's Poetic Style

It is important to note that while writing the poem, Coleridge adopted the form of a ballad, a popular Medieval verse form usually consisting of four line stanzas in simple rhythm. Unlike the stories in traditional ballads involving ordinary people through tales orally transmitted, Coleridge's poem incorporates suspense and horror. At the same time, Coleridge seems to have imagined the action of the story roughly in the 16th century. Although the rhyme scheme of a traditional ballad is abcb, in this poem Coleridge introduces variations by lengthening the stanzas into five or six lines. This is important because it adds to the poem's variety and helps us understand how Coleridge sought to use ideas or images beyond the restrictions of the four-line stanza form. Look at the following stanza from Part I that goes beyond four lines:

> "With sloping masts and dipping prow,
> As who pursued with yell and blow
> Still treads the shadow of his foe,
> And forward bends his head,
> The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,
> And southward aye we fled." (**Lines** 45-50)

However, Coleridge does justice to the form of traditional ballads by keeping the feature of internal rhyme with a telling effect on the ear of the readers as we find in the following examples:

> "It cracked and growled, and roared and howled"
> (**Line** 61)
> "With throats unslaked, with black lips baked"
> (**Line** 157)
> "With heavy thump a lifeless lump
> They dropped down one by one"
> (**Lines** 218-219)

Another important point to be noted is Coleridge's use of simple words and phrases. Very often, he uses a vocabulary that might have been used by the ordinary people of his day and avoids complex phrases and complicated syntax. This is aligned with the form of the ballad— a kind of poetry meant only for the ordinary people and you should note that the Mariner himself is also an ordinary man caught up in extraordinary events. The effect of his heightened awareness on particular ideas and images is sought to be increased by repetition, which is a figure of speech used very freely and beautifully in the poem. Look at the following lines. Underlying such simple words is an intense expression about the sense of desolation experienced by the mariner.

> "Alone, alone, all, all alone,
> Alone on a wide wide sea!
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony." (**Lines** 232-35)

Another stylistic features of Coleridge in this poem relates to his exploitation of the appeal to the senses. In a varied way, this poem provides colour, sound and sensation of touch to a significant extent. You can easily read the poet's descriptions of Polar ice in Part I, Sea creatures in Part IV, Storms and angelic

sounds in Part V— all of which exemplify Coleridge's power of imagination. Other subtle effects of the poem include *the agony of the beating pulse through a parched body* (**Lines** 248-252), *the blessed relief of wetness on the skin* (**Lines** 301-4), *shuddering in fear* (**Lines** 436-7, 446-451), *the feel of breeze* (**Lines** 456-9) and so on.

Finally, you are supposed to look at the variety in mood shifting throughout the poem—the moods of companionship and desolation, agony and relief, fear and joy, calmness and horror, malignity and beneficence, loathing and love etc. Look at the following stanzas that combine horror and serenity in its most rhythmic and musical effect.

"I closed my lids, and kept them close,
And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay dead like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet." (**Lines** 247-252)

As we have already read, the whole poem is written in the form of a Mediaeval ballad. It is possible to see something of the allegorical and symbolic power of the poem. The lack of water represents the dryness of spirit, the becalmed ship symbolises the aimless soul of a man who has sinned and who awaits eventual redemption. The explicit moral is essentially Christian as we find in the following lines:

"Water, water, every where
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink." (**Lines**119-122)
"He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best who loveth best,
All things both great and small.

For the dear God, who lovethus,
He made and loveth all." (**Lines** 612-617)

Thus, we find Coleridge using a variety of stylistic devices, which add to his perfection as a great poet of the Romantic age.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: What are the important aspects of Coleridge's poetic style?

Q 12: What rhyme scheme did Coleridge use for this poem?



6.5 LET US SUM UP

As you come to the end of the unit, you have found that the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is unique among Coleridge's important works in different ways. From your reading of the various sections of this unit, you must have realised that it has little in common with the poetry of other Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Keats. Rather, the scholarly notes, the epigraph, and the archaic language used in the poem combine to produce the impression that the "Rime" is a ballad of ancient times. This poem was first published in the1797 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and since then it came to be considered a great poem of Christian symbolism in terms of its moral lesson that "all creatures great and small" are created by God and should be loved. Critics have found in the "Rime" a number of interesting readings, ranging from Christian parable to political allegory.



6.6 FURTHER READING

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6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 5: The first suggestion came from a strange dream related to him by a friend, in which appeared a skeleton ship with figures in it … … much the greatest part of the story was invented by Coleridge … …Wordsworth also suggested some parts like crime committed which should bring 'life in death' upon the Old Mariner etc.

Ans to Q No 6: In this part the Mariner remains a detached onlooker of nature's fury… …this part exemplifies Coleridge's careful handling of the senses of sight and hearing… …the terrible storm triggers off the rising up of the dead men supernaturally… …in this part the Mariner also begins the homeward journey.

Ans to Q No 7: Autobiographical Impulse… …Nature Poetry and Coleridge… …Moral Implications of the Poem… …Christian Elements.

Ans to Q No 8: The poem can be read in the context of 18th century development of the arts of landscape painting and gardening… … both Wordsworth and Coleridge brought a new and generally more

lasting perspective to nature poetry as they viewed nature with intensity and sensitivity.

Ans to Q No 9: The killing of the albatross was in some way a violation of what was due to a creature of nature…... it is the violation of a trust…... there is a problem with the punishment also… …that the Mariner is to be punished is fine, but the sailors too suffer horribly and die… …to the Mariner, love and respect for all God's creatures becomes a condition of spiritual well being and kinship with his fellow humans.

Ans to Q No 10: Coleridge's mediations on poetry, poets and poetic imagination can be derived from his *Biographia Literaria*… …his theory of Fancy and Imagination and the distinctions between the two… …Coleridge wished to revive the use of fantastic elements in poetry and the concept of "Willing Suspension of Disbelief" explained how a modern, enlightened audience might continue to enjoy such types of story.

Ans to Q No 11: Coleridge adopted the form of Medieval ballad usually consisting of four line stanzas in simple rhythm… …Coleridge does justice to the form by keeping the feature of internal rhyme… …another important point to be noted is Coleridge's use of simple words and phrases… …another stylistic feature of Coleridge in this poem relates to his exploitation of the appeal to the senses.

Ans to Q No 12: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is written in loose, short ballad stanzas … …The meter is also somewhat loose, but odd lines are generally tetrameter… …The rhymes generally alternate in an ABAB or ABABAB scheme… …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.



6.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways, do you thinks, does Coleridge show his concern for the moral and the spiritual values in the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"?

Q 3: How does Coleridge portray the natural world before and after the Ancient Mariner shoots the Albatross?

Q 5: In your opinion, is the Ancient Mariner's punishment for killing the Albatross fair? Whose fate is worse, the Ancient Mariner's or the sailors'? Why?

Q 6: Discuss Coleridge's use of imagery throughout "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". How does he use sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell to inform the reader's experience of the story?

Q 7: Why do you think the Ancient Mariner kills the Albatross? Do his actions make him unusually cruel, or do they connect him to the whole of humanity?

Q 8: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a poem steeped in symbolism. Choose an aspect or character of the poem (such as the Albatross) and discuss its symbolic meanings.

***

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