

## The Structure of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* tells a wonderful adventure tale and has a place among the highest works of exciting frontier adventure. Danger and strange sea adventure grow out of the title and introduction to fill the Mariner's rime to the last syllable. Coleridge conveys feeling without an "official" form, deviating from standard ballad stanzas to five or six line groupings which may come in clumps or alone. Repeated rhymes and lines fit within his "organic" pattern, as do inner rhymes. The side-notes' prose explanations complement the poetry to explain less obvious points of plot, unify the work, and interrupt the stream of verse, preventing it from growing repetitious. The Albatross ties each section to the spirit-world introduction and distinguishes the seven parts. Together, these elements cohesively form the constitution of the poem.

The very first stanza already gives us the voice one would expect from an old man of the sea:

It is an ancient Mariner  
And he stoppeth one of three.  
—"By thy long gray beard and glittering eye,  
now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"

The Mariner, "ancient," with a "long gray beard and glittering eye," brings to mind the seafarers of *Kidnapped* and the like. We have already heard about "*Naturas invisibles*" in the introduction, and have been instructed to pass beyond the petty concerns of daily life<sup>1</sup>; the poem leads us away to the sea through the speech of the Mariner. The only

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<sup>1</sup>The introduction is in Latin, and so I just paraphrase in English. *Naturas invisibles* are invisible beings, and a translation of that sentence of the introduction and the next would be: "I can easily believe that there are more invisible than visible beings in the universe. But of their families, degrees, connections, distinctions, and functions, who shall tell us?" To see the entire introduction along with an English translation, I suggest you refer to the newest *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, page 744.

additional physical description after the first stanza is of his “skinny hand”(10)<sup>2</sup>. The prose notes alongside the page call him “the old seafaring man.” These complete his physical description; the tale begins “with his glittering eye”(13) which keeps the “Wedding Guest... spellbound.” The Mariner “hath his will”(16) and the Guest must listen “like a three years’ child”(15). While a reader of the poem soon slips into the Mariner’s spell, he is not “constrained” by magic and he views the control from the outside. The Mariner’s magical power complements his physical description to complete Coleridge’s portrait. His nature, the tale itself filled with “STORM-BLAST”(41), “fog-smoke white”(76), and “ice mast high”(53), compose much of the legendary frontiersman tone which is an apparent attraction of the poem.

Ballad stanza, an *abcb* grouping of alternating tetra/trimeter lines, serves *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* well. Having all-rhymed lines would make the poem too neat and tidy for “a thousand thousand slimy things”(238) or “the curse in a dead man’s eye”(260). Ancient Mariners with ghastly stories do not speak in cleanly wrapped up parcels, and the poem assumes the voice of the Ancient Mariner. Having no rhyme at all would, in contrast, tend to disunite things too much; rhythm belongs in this many-times told Rime that the Wedding Guest must listen to. Short stanzas, which add pauses when the reader’s eye moves between groupings, are also appropriate for this adventurer’s tale because old frontiersmen draw in air with deliberation. Ancient Mariners just don’t tell their tales to constrained audiences in sestinas, or *Diving into the Wreck* free verse, or *Ulysses*-like chaptersentences. Ballad stanza allows the Mariner to combine dramatic myth and unadorned human speech at a tempo that suits his character.

After sailing through an initial eleven ballad stanzas, a different form appears. A stanza of *abbcde* pops up, where *a* forms a partial rhyme with the *b*’s, and the *d* line has an inner rhyme; the rest of Part I contains only more ballad stanzas. Part II contains

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<sup>2</sup>A number like this refers to the verse of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* where the quote preceding it may be found.

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 brought the fog and mist. (91-102),

This is a tremendous break in the pattern, in the middle of a section without other deviations. Was Coleridge unable to think up anything to fit the Correct pattern? If so, he got worse in Part III, which has two pairs of five line stanzas (157-166 + 185-194) after each other in an *abccb* pattern, two six-line *abcdbd* stanzas (143-148 + 171-176), and a gargantuan nine line grouping(203-211). Part IV has four five-liners and two sixers, Part V contains six fivers and three six-liners, Part VI has two sixers with different rhyme schemes, and Part VII contains four fivers and four sixers. Second-graders can color in between the lines; cannot Samuel Taylor Coleridge maintain ballad stanza form, that only rhymes half the time, considering the marvelous bounty of English? If these deviations alone were not bad enough, sometimes rhymes or even whole lines are repeated. What can justify this apparent flaw in his piece?

Our text's autobiographical note states, "[Coleridge's] theories on 'organic form' provided a basis for the development of a freer poetic, and may have been the progenitor of many twentieth-century experiments in free verse." His irregular stanzas, like his repeated lines, advance the purpose of the poem in various ways. Lines 91-102, quoted above, are a central theme of the piece. The side notes state with the first of the two quoted stanzas, "His shipmates cry out against the ancient Mariner, for killing the bird of

good luck.” With the second, they say “But when the fog cleared off, they justify the same, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime.” Thus, killing the Albatross brings on all the later “penance”(408). The typical stanzas flow along, but a break in the regular pattern makes the reader pay special attention. Section highlights, from the initial storm that sends the ship to the South Pole (45-50), to the ship’s sudden sinking (550-555), occur in non-ballad stanzas. Variations change the texture of verse. The five-line *abccb* form, which follows a 4/3/4/4/3 pattern<sup>3</sup>, carries a reader or listener quickly past the couplet to complete the rhyme. This conveys the increase in breath speed and heart rate associated with shock and fear, as well as the emphasis on the *c* verses appropriate to:

*Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,  
 Her locks were yellow as gold:  
 Her skin was as white as leprosy,  
 The Nightmare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,  
 Who thick man’s blood with cold. (190-194)

Also, six-line stanzas, which usually are *abcbdb* and 4/3/4/3/4/3, tend to contain a twist in their last two lines; examples are (171-176) or (446-451):

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.

Coleridge reaches his largest stanza in the nine-liner of (203-211). Rhyming *aabccbddd* with a 4/4/3/4/4/3/4/4/3 pattern, it conveys the dread anticipation of the moment when the moon came out and the crew dropped dead, leaving each cadaver to “curse[] [the Mariner] with his eye”(215) for killing the Albatross. This stanza is:

We listened and looked sideways up!

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<sup>3</sup>This refers to the number of feet in a line. 4/3/4/4/3 means the first line of a stanza has four feet, as do the third and fourth, while the second and third contain three feet.

Fear at my heart, as at a cup,  
My lifeblood 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—  
Til clomb above the eastern bar  
The hornéd Moon, with one bright star  
Within the nether tip.

Next to it a side-narrative begins that proceeds past the end of the stanza. Beginning “At the rising of the Moon,” the words “One after another,” appear next to the following stanza, and “His shipmates drop down dead” concludes next to the third. This adds to the hesitant, anticipatory foreboding which the pause following the disjointed *b* rhymes bring. Single stanzas do not get longer than nine lines like that, but atypical groupings can come in clusters which add up to larger passages of non-ballad rhythm. Part III, coinciding with the height of the Polar Spirit's rage, has a particularly high concentration of groupings greater than four lines in length. Coleridge uses these stanzas to break up smooth, constant flow and boost his lines' tone and power.

Repetition can create contrasts, such as that between lines 94+96 and lines 100+102 (91-102 quoted above). The sailors' change from “Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,”(95) to “'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,”(101) makes them guilty and brings on Death. The repeated pairs highlight their shift in attitude. Repetition can also generate tone directly, as does:

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. (143-148)

As these sailors lie around with nothing to do, the same redundant thoughts pass through their heads and hang over their stupor. In four lines, we get as many “weary”s and two

“glazed”s. The repetition wearies us and conveys the appropriate painfully dragging tone. Coleridge manipulates repetition this way in other passages, such as “Day after day, day after day”(115) and “Water, water, everywhere”(119+121). He also restates for emphasis, the way “With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,”(157+162) does. The first time that phrase appears the crew knows not of the ship, and “could not laugh nor wail,”(158); after hearing “A sail! A sail!”(161), with a “flash of joy,” “Gramercy! they for joy did grin”(164). Their hope ends their muteness and changes “utter drought”(159) to “they were drinking all”(166); here, the (157+162) repetition highlights their unaltered physical state of thirst.

Inner rhymes quicken tempo. In the third line of a ballad stanza, they pull a reader through the line to the resolving rhymed conclusion, while in the first line the extra kick carries over to the next without the backup force of the additional resolved *b* rhyme. The beat also receives greater emphasis. Compare:

And a good south wind sprung up behind;  
The Albatross did follow,  
And every day, for food or play,  
Came to the mariners’ hollo! (71-74)

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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. (253-256)

The first stanza’s inner rhyme creates upbeat overtones and lines that accelerate in a way that its partner does not. Below may be the happiest stanza of the poem:

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,  
It [the Albatross] perched for vespers nine;  
Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,  
Glimmered the white Moon-shine.” (74-77)

It contains two inner rhymes. This sort of harmonious sonority, appropriate for contrast with the soon-to-follow “I shot the ALBATROSS”(82), does not fit the tense struggle of

much of the rest of the work. The dearth of both full-rhyming *abab* sets and other ballad stanzas with both first and third line inner rhymes exists because an up-beat, skipping tempo does not suit the Mariner's tale. An additional disruption to the flow of verse, author-created side notes, are extremely rare if not unique to this poem. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* uses these prose descriptions for several purposes. Side notes turn one away from the poetry for a few moments, a precaution against tediousness since it breaks up the flow of rhyme. They increase the natural pause between each stanza (already present because the phrases end with the stanzas and because of the empty space between groupings), turning the eye and mind in a different physical and mental direction; we turn to a new part of the page, prose instead of poetry, a refreshing change. They also provide commentary which enhances our understanding of a section.

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 specter-bark. (199-202)

Some people will realize from the verses that there was no sunset but an instantaneous change; others will know only after reading "No twilight within the courts of the Sun."

And some in dreams assuréd were  
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;  
Nine fathom deep he had followed us  
From the land of mist and snow. (131-134)

The above has the note "A Spirit had followed them; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning who the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more." Such a description fills out and complements the poetry, as well as humbly re-casting information. Some commentary, like that just mentioned, refers back to the introduction; the Spirits, the

invisible beings of the universe out of *Archaeologiae Philosophiae*<sup>4</sup> which man has no knowledge of,<sup>5</sup> crop up in the side notes “requiring vengeance,” acting behind the trials the Mariner endures.

The Polar Spirit-beloved Albatross unites the introduction and all seven parts of the Rime thematically. The “STORM-BLAST”(41) that sends the ship south “with his o’ertaking wings”(44) comes from that Spirit and relates to the Albatross. “STORM-BLAST” and “ALBATROSS”(82) are the only capitalized words of Part I. The action of the storm is compared to that of a bird (41-44). Once near the Pole, it is obvious that the Albatross causes the “ice [to] split”(69) for the ship to escape. The notes to lines 71-74 and 80-83, respectively, state “And lo! the Albatross proveth a bird of good omen, and followeth the ship as it returned northward through fog and floating ice,” and “The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.” Part I ends with:

“God save thee, ancient Mariner!  
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!–  
Why look’st thou so?”– With my crossbow  
I shot the ALBATROSS. (79-83)

This is the pivotal action of Part I, and the last stanza. Part II brings the Mariner to his punishment; after “His shipmates... make themselves accomplices in the crime,... the Albatross begins to be revenged.” The “Spirit that plagued [them] so”(132) came from the bird of “the land of mist and snow”(134). At this point, the Mariner details:

Ah! well-a-day! what evil looks  
Had I from old and young!  
Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
About my neck was hung. (139-142)

This, the last stanza of Part II, completes the next stage of the Albatross-related events. In III, the capitalization of “DEATH”(188+189) and “LIFE-IN-DEATH”(193) show that these too come from the Spirit responsible for the “STORM-BLAST” and

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<sup>4</sup> Burnet’s book, a quote from which is *The Rime*’s prologue.

<sup>5</sup> I am paraphrasing sections of the Latin introduction.

“ALBATROSS.” The continuing revenge for the bird makes the Mariner’s “shipmates drop down dead” while “Life-in-Death begins her work on [him].” Part III’s final stanza brings us back to the Albatross’ killing:

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 crossbow! (220-224)

The Mariner said “With my crossbow/ I shot the ALBATROSS”(81-82); again we close by returning to the bird. In IV, after more “horrible penance... The spell begins to break.”

The Part closes with

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea. (288-291)

While the Mariner loses the cross for the Albatross in Part II, IV ends with at least a partial reunion with God, the Albatross leaving his neck like sins that had been propitiated after he “blessed [living things] unaware”(285). Each section consistently ends upon the changes in the Mariner’s relation to the Albatross, and V is no exception.

Its last three stanzas,

“Is it he?” quoth one [spirit], “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.” (398-409)

The importance given to the bird, the evil of the Mariner’s crime, and the results of his actions come out respectively in each concluding stanza. Part VI contains the only end stanza with more than four lines; like the vocal assumption of bird-guilt by the crew (97-102), it has six. These lines counteract the Mariner’s previously incurred Albatross-related sin:

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. (508-513)

The circle is almost complete. The last lines the Mariner speaks in Part VII declare:

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all. (614-617)

The complete cycle from the blood guilt of the bird, through punishment, to final reconciliation and repentance is over. The Albatross-related conclusions of each Part and the emphasis on spirits in the introduction demonstrate that the relationship between the Mariner and the Albatross forms the thematic superstructure within which all other parts of the poem work.

The adventure of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* exists in a framework of ballad stanzas to which other rhymes, side notes, and the Mariner/Albatross+Spirit relationship are added. The rhyme and rhythm of the poem, the breaks in pattern of the prose side notes, and the content of the tale itself create the spellbinding tone of legendary exploration which suits a Rime of an Ancient Mariner. His “inhospitable kill[ing]” of the Albatross, the horrible and wondrous consequences, and his eventual shrieving are the foundation of the plot. Coleridge constructs the rest, the human struggle against natural

evil and darkness within, the range of emotion from wonder to pain to relief to joy, within this fundamental verse, prose, and plot groundwork.