



GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Poetic Technique Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 21 February 2017 - 6:00PM

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So for those of you who don't know the poem, how can it be summarised?

The poem is divided into seven parts:

Part I: The Wedding guest, the voyage, stuck in ice, he kills the albatross.

The Mariner stops a wedding guest and insists on telling him his story. The ship sails south to the equator. The wedding guest hears the music of wedding beginning and tries to leave. A storm hits the ship and drives them south where they become stuck in ice. An albatross appears and is befriended by the crew. A south wind blows up and takes them northward. The Mariner kills the albatross with his crossbow.

Part II: They suffer punishment for his crime and are becalmed.

The crew at first condemn him for the killing but when the fog dissipates they commend him. They sail north and become becalmed at the equator. They suffer from agonising thirst. Slimy things are on the surface, the lights on the water are 'burnt green, and blue and white'. A spirit follows them under the ship nine fathoms down. The seamen hang the dead albatross around the Mariner's neck.

Part III: A skeleton ship comes, and its ghastly crew gambles for their souls. The crew dies.

He sees a ship far off. The crew celebrates, thinking that they will be saved, but then despair when they wonder how a ship can sail without wind. It turns out to be a skeleton ship with only one woman, Life-in-Death, and a mate, Death, for crew, aboard.

They through dice for the crew and she wins. The sun sets and the skeleton ship leaves. The crew dies, one by one, and their souls fly out, 'to bliss or woe'.

Part IV: He is left alone for seven days. He blesses the water snakes, and the spell is broken.

The wedding guest is afraid that the Mariner is a ghost, but the Mariner assures him that he did not die. The Mariner is alone and tries to pray unsuccessfully. For seven days he looks at the dead men and, 'Yet I cannot die'. He sees the water snakes lit up by the moon and blesses them. Suddenly he is able to pray and the albatross falls from his neck.

Part V: It rains. The ship is moved north, its crew reanimated by spirits. He swoons and hears two voices.

He sleeps and when he awakes it is raining. A storm blows up and the dead seamen arise, and start to man the ship once more. 'It had been strange, even in a dream, / To have seen those dead men rise.' The wedding guest is afraid, but is reassured that it is not the souls of the dead men that reanimate them, but 'a troop of spirits blest'. They sing around the mast, continuing to sail on, moved from the depths beneath. The spirit from the snow and ice moves them to the equator again, where the ship stands still. It moves back and forth then makes a sudden bound. The Mariner falls into a swoon. He hears two voices in his sleep tell of his crime and trials.

Part VI: The two voices talk. He wakes up in his native land. The spirits signal the shore, and a boat appears.

The two voices talk back and forth as the ship is driven faster and faster He wakes and the ship now sails slowly. The crew is still up, and their eyes curse him. Suddenly the spell is broken and a sweet breeze blows on him and him alone. He sees his native land. The spirits leave the dead bodies and each appears in its own form, full of light. They stand as signals to the land, but make no sound. A boat is heard coming towards him. The Pilot, his boy, and the Hermit are all in the boat. He hopes that the Hermit will shrive his soul - provide atonement - to wash away the blood of the albatross.

Part VII: The ship sinks but he is saved. He is compelled to wander and tell his tale.

The Hermit who lives in the woods loves to talk to mariners from faraway lands. The lights of the signal have disappeared, and the boat appears warped and the sails are like skeletons. As they approach a rumble is heard under the water and the ship then splits and sinks. The Mariner is dragged aboard the boat. When he moves his lips they scream and the Pilot faints. The Mariner takes the oars. When they reach the land he implores the Hermit to atone him. The Mariner is overcome by a fit which forces him to tell his tale. Since then, he has had to travel from land to land telling his tale. He has powers of speech and knows the men to whom he must tell his

The Rime is the story of a Mariner who is punished for killing an albatross.
His shipmates are also punished because they justify his crime.
They die of thirst one by one while the ship is stuck on the ocean under a blazing sun.
The Mariner's penance is even more terrible:
he will return to his native country but
 will be obliged to travel endlessly in order to
 tell people about his experience and
 teach them to love and respect all creatures of God.

the world of 'The Rime' is like that of a dream
a juxtaposition of ordinary experience and supernatural events.

Examples of ordinary experience:

the fury of the storm
the world of ice, snow and mist
the ocean

Examples of supernatural events:

A spirit follows the ship.
The albatross falls from the mariner's neck as soon as he repents.
The Mariner has a ghostly appearance and exerts a hypnotic power on the wedding-guest.
The dead on the ship do not rot.

All elements belonging to the world of nature (the sun, the sea, the storm) are vividly described
and evoke real images in the reader's mind but ...

they are also charged with a deeper symbolic meaning:

the Sun = severe divine justice.

the Calm = the desolation of a sinful soul.

the Rotting sea = the Mariner's soul troubled by his guilt.

the Moonlight spreading a sort of white frost = the refreshing coolness of forgiveness

The dominant atmosphere is:

uncanny and eerie

full of strange, mysterious, supernatural and frightening elements

built up through the accumulation of strange and mysterious incidents:

the Mariner has a ghostly appearance

he exerts a hypnotic power on the wedding guest

the ice is a threatening presence

the dead bodies of the Mariner's shipmates curse him with their eyes

the Rime reproduces the traditional form of a ballad but with some variations.

Traditional Ballad

4-line stanzas rhyming abab;

stress pattern : 4-3-4-3;

story-line: simple and short;

narrative technique : narrator and direct speech;

subjects: universal themes (love, death, revenge,)

supernatural themes (ghosts);

language : use of repetition.

the stanza is basically a 4-line stanza but there are also stanzas with 5 or more lines;

the typical abab rhyme is present but not very regular,

the length of the story is untypical;

the long descriptions of natural landscapes are not typical;

the moral drawn at the end is not usual.

the presence of the supernatural is, instead, typical.

Religious interpretation:

the killing of the albatross is a sin against nature or God ;

the Mariner' s sufferings are a form of purgatorial fire and ...

the return to his country represents salvation.

Aesthetic interpretation:

the Mariner is seen as an artist who ...

breaks the bounds of conventions in his search for beauty and self-knowledge,

he passes through a terrible period of trial, and

is eventually saved by his power of imagination (watching the beautiful sea-snakes);

his mission is to pass his discovery of truth to ordinary men, but...

he only finds a largely uncomprehending audience (the wedding guest).

The poem is rich in sound effects and imagery:

Repetition;

Internal rhyme;

Alliteration

Similes;

Personification;

Besides end rhyme, Coleridge also uses internal rhyme. Here are some examples:

“Hold off! Unhand me, grey-beard **loon!**”

Eft**soons** his hand dropt he. (lines 11-12)

The ship drove **fast**, loud roared the **blast** (line 49)

And through the **drifts** the snowy **clifts** (line 54)

In mist or **cloud**, on mast or **shroud** (line 75)

“Why look’st thou **so?**” – “With my cross-**bow**

The fair breeze **blew**, the white foam **flew** (line 103)

Inversion:

Instead of the cross, the Albatross

About my neck was hung. (lines 141-142)

Instead of "was hung about my neck."

There passed a weary time... (line 143)

"A weary time passed..."

The naked hulk alongside came (line 195)

Instead of "came alongside."

The effects can add drama - delaying a main verb, or slow the line to add emphasis to, for example, 'weary time...';

Enjambment

.....Coleridge uses enjambment, running the sense of one line of verse to the next:

And now the storm-blast came, **and he**

Was tyrannous and strong (lines 41-42)

And through the drifts **the snowy cliffs**

Did send a dismal sheen (lines 55-56)

Instead of the cross, **the Albatross**

About my neck was hung. (lines 141-142)

There passed a weary time. **Each throat**

Was parch'd, and glazed each eye. (lines 143-144)

Figures of Speech.

The poem is rich in figures of speech. Here are some examples:

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Alliteration

By thy long **g**rey **b**eard and **g**littering eye (line 3)

And **l**istens **l**ike a three year child (line 15)

The Wedding-Guest **h**ere **b**eat **h**is **b**reast,

For **h**e **h**eard the loud **b**assoon. (lines 31-32)

The **f**urrow **f**ollowed **f**ree (line 104)

Anaphora, or repetition adds emphasis, rhythm, and, perhaps, produces a hypnotic effect:

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He holds him with his skinny hand,

...

He holds him with his glittering eye - (lines 9 & 13)

Below the kirk, **below the** hill

Below the light-house top. (lines 23-24)

The ice was here, **the ice** was there,

The ice was all around. (line 59-60)

With throats unslaked, **with** black lips baked (line 157)

Without a breeze, **without** a tide (line 169)

Her lips were red, **her** looks were free,

Her locks were yellow as gold:

Her skin was as white as leprosy (lines 190-192)

They groan'd, **they** stirr'd, **they** all uprose,

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Irony: the ultimate irony is this:

Water, water, every where,

And all the boards did shrink ;

Water, water, every where,

Nor any drop to drink. (lines 119-122)

Water is everywhere, but there is none to drink.

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Metaphor

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast, (line 37)

Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,

And cursed me with his eye. (lines 215-216)

Likening the appearance of the eye to a curse

They coil'd and swam; and every track

Was a flash of golden fire. (lines 281-282)

Likening the wake left by the sea snakes to fire

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Onomatopoeia

It **crack'd** and **growl'd**, and **roar'd** and **howl'd** (line 61)

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Personification

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. (lines 25-28)

Comparison of the sun to a person

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Simile

The Wedding-Guest stood still,

And listens like a three year child: (lines 14 & 15)

Likening the attentiveness of the Wedding-Guest to the complete attention given by a small child

The bride hath paced into the hall,

Red as a rose is she; (lines 33 & 34)

Likening the beauty of the bride to the beauty of a rose (I'll come back to this in a moment)

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound! (61 & 62)

Likening the sound of the ice breaking to noises imagined in a swoon (or faint)

Every soul, it passed me by,

Like the whizz of my crossbow! (lines 223-224)

Likening the passing of a soul to the sound of a shot arrow

The sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky

Lay like a load on my weary eye (lines 251-252)

Likening the sky and sea to a weight on the eye

Her beams bemoaned the sultry main,

Like April hoar-frost spread (lines 268-269)

Likening the reflected sunbeams to frost

The water, like a witch's oils,

Burnt green, and blue and white. (lines 129-130)

Likening the water to witch's oils

Day after day, day after day,

We stuck, nor breath nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean. (lines 115-118)

Likening the motionless ship and ocean to paintings

Synecdoche, a trope in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa:

The western wave was all a-flame (line 171)

Wave refers to the sea.

I fear thee and thy glittering eye,

Simile is equally important in the poem. Let's define simile loosely in terms of its form. It is a comparative strategy usually introduced by "like," "as," or "just as... so". The important implication of this is that a simile, though it cannot actually express identity or opposites, can express an infinite number of degrees of likeness or unlikeness.