

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Summary

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner relates the supernatural events experienced by a mariner on a long sea voyage. The Mariner stops a man who is on the way to a wedding ceremony, and begins to recite his story. The Wedding-Guest's reaction turns from bemusement and impatience to fascination as the Mariner's story progresses.

The Mariner's tale begins with his ship leaving harbour; despite initial good fortune, the ship is driven off course by a storm and, driven south, eventually reaches Antarctica. An albatross, traditionally a good omen, appears and leads them out of the threatening land of ice; even as the albatross is praised by the ship's crew, however, the Mariner shoots it with a crossbow, for reasons unknown (*with my cross-bow / I shot the albatross*). The other sailors are angry with the Mariner, as they thought the albatross brought the South Wind that led them out of the Antarctic: (*Ah, wretch, said they / the bird to slay / that made the breeze to blow*). However, the sailors change their minds when the weather becomes warmer and the mist disappears: (*'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay / that bring the fog and mist*). The crime arouses the wrath of supernatural spirits who then pursue the ship "from the land of mist and snow"; the south wind which had initially led them from the land of ice now sends the ship into uncharted waters, where it is becalmed.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.

Here, however, the sailors change their minds again and blame the Mariner for the torment of their thirst, and hang the albatross around the mariner's neck as a sign of his guilt: (*Ah! Well a-day! What evil looks / Had I from old and young! / Instead of the cross, the albatross / About my neck was hung*). Eventually, in an eerie passage, the ship encounters a ghostly vessel. On board are Death (a skeleton) and the "Night-mare Life-in-Death" (a deathly-pale woman), who are playing dice for the souls of the crew. With a roll of the dice, Death wins the lives of the crew members and Life-in-Death the life of the mariner, a prize she considers more valuable. Her name is a clue as to the mariner's fate; he will endure a fate worse than death as punishment for his killing of the albatross.

One by one all two hundred crew members die, but the Mariner lives on, seeing for seven days and nights the curse in the eyes of the crew's corpses, whose last expressions remain upon their faces. Eventually, the Mariner's curse is lifted when he sees sea creatures swimming in the water. Despite his cursing them as "slimy things" earlier in the poem, he suddenly sees their true beauty and blesses them (*a spring of love gush'd from my heart and I bless'd them unaware*); suddenly, as he manages to pray, the albatross falls from his neck and his guilt is partially expiated. The bodies of the crew, possessed by good spirits, rise again and steer the ship back home, where it sinks in a whirlpool, leaving only the Mariner behind. As penance for his deed, the Mariner is forced to wander the earth and tell his story, and teach a lesson to those he meets:

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