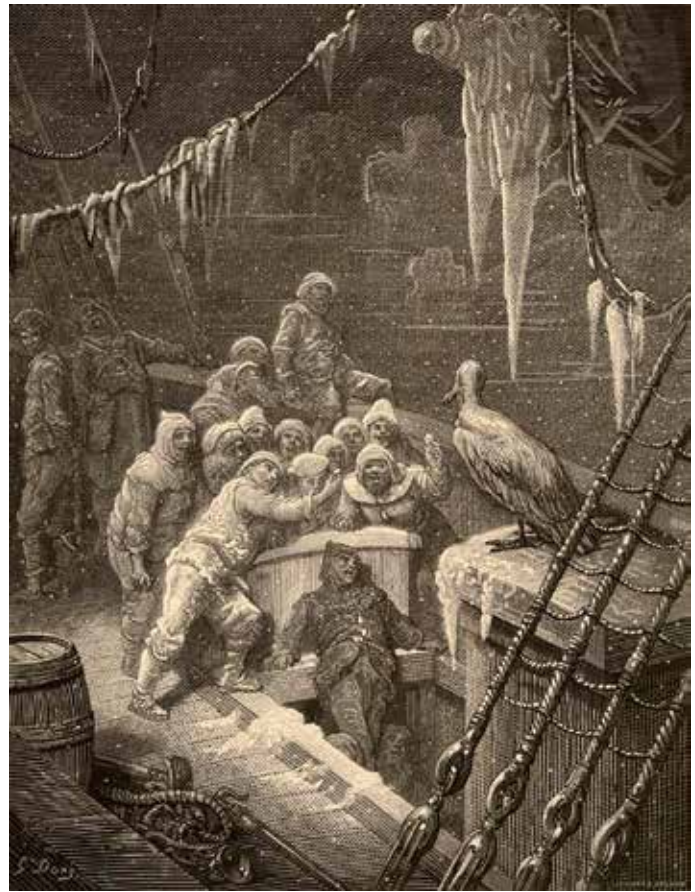


Analysis of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is one of the most famous poems in the English language. Even if we haven't read the poem, we're likely familiar with its most famous line—"Water, water, every where/Nor any drop to drink"—or have heard of the concept of an "albatross around my neck," a reference to the albatross hung "Instead of the cross" around the neck of the mariner in Part II as a way of symbolizing the curse that his decision to kill the bird brought upon the ship. These famous moments, along with the poem's haunting story and captivating metrical construction, have allowed the poem to remain widely read and studied centuries after it was first published. The poem also provides a paradigmatic illustration of how transformative journeys have formed the backbone of some of the most enduring artistic works throughout history. In this case, the journey described in the poem is transformative not just for the person who undertook it, but also for those who hear about it.

The poem's meter is in the form of "ballad measure," a traditional poetic form that typically features quatrains following an *abcb* rhyme scheme with iambic tetrameter (four measures of iambic feet, which are composed of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable) in the first and third lines, and iambic trimeter (three measures of iambic feet) in the second and fourth lines. Coleridge strategically plays with this form. He periodically utilizes sestinas, or six-line stanzas, as a way of emphasizing the significance or intensity of a scene, as when he describes the incoming storm in Part I or when he details the appearance of the nightmarish ship "Life-In-Death" in Part III. He also utilizes shorter stanzas to produce a sense of shock and suddenness, such as when the mariner believes he sees a ship on the horizon at the beginning of Part III: "When looking westward, I beheld/A something in the sky."

These variations in the structure and length of the stanzas are complemented by metrical substitutions, or moments in which parts of the iambic pattern are replaced by spondaic feet, which feature two stressed syllables and which help create a longer, slower feeling, as when Coleridge describes the chilled blood of the crew as they witness the emergence of the Life-In-Death: "The nightmare Life-In-Death was she,/who thickens man's blood/with cold." The form of the poem and the subtle variations to it help Coleridge produce



Engraving by Gustave Doré for an 1876 edition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* depicting the frozen crew and the albatross (1876).

the poem's emotional and moral effects.

The mariner's narrative is also crucial to the poem's effects, particularly the moral lesson that the story is meant to impart. The poem begins with the mariner, now old and gray, stopping a wedding-guest on his way to a wedding reception. The wedding-guest at first tries to just ignore the old man but is inexplicably drawn to the man and his story—"He cannot choose but hear"—and sits down to hear the tale. The mariner recounts how, while a sailor on a ship, he shot and killed an albatross (a large white bird) that had been flying nearby, an act his shipmates first condemn and then, after suggesting the bird had brought poor weather, excuse."

However, after killing the albatross the ocean winds disappear, and the ship is immobilized at sea. The men begin to fall sick from dehydration and exhaustion, and the crew slowly begins to lose hope. This descent into madness culminates with the appearance of the horrifying ship "Life-in-Death," which seems to be a supernatural vessel carrying spirits of death.