THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

AND OTHER POEMS OF THE ROMANTIC ERA

Selections by Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

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BYRON, SHELLEY, KEATS

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NOTES

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

The 18th century was a time of revolution; the French Revolution, especially, was supposed to usher in a new era of enlightenment, brotherhood, and individual freedom. The artistic movement that arose in Europe in reaction to the events of this time is called Romanticism, and it is characterized by a stressing of emotion and imagination, as opposed to the emphasis on classical forms that was important to previous artists. In England, the major Romantic poets were Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and John Keats. These poets took up the revolutionary ideas of personal and spiritual emancipation through language that is often bold and simple, like the speech of the common people of England.

Romantic poetry frequently focuses on images of nature, which is viewed as a force that expresses sympathy with human beings. Romanticism also features supernatural events and includes melancholy settings, such as deserted castles or monasteries on lonely hillsides.

A concern for human society also marks the early English Romantics. Blake describes a time when Albion (England) will be free from oppression and injustice, and all men will enter into a new age and a new heaven on Earth. Wordsworth despises the ugliness of the expanding cities and urges a return to a spiritual home in nature. Later Romantic poets, though, especially Keats, focus more on the intense emotions and deep paradoxes of human existence.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

The Romantic Movement was a literary, artistic, and intellectual movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It began as a reaction against the rigid conventions—artistic, social, and political—of the Enlightenment and asserted the power and the value of the individual.

Romanticism stressed strong emotion and the individual imagination as the ultimate critical and moral authority. The Romantic poets, therefore, felt free to challenge traditional notions of *form*. They likewise found themselves abandoning social conventions, particularly the privileges of the aristocracy, which they believed to be detrimental to individual fulfillment.

Because Romanticism is, at its core, a rebellion *against* rigid standards of form, taste, and behavior, it is difficult to establish a set of standards to *define* Romanticism. It is possible, however, to point out some common motifs that offer an overview of what the Romantic poets believed and tried to accomplish in their poetry.

The Politics of the Romantics:

- The Romantics were, for the most part, disheartened liberals.
- The successful revolution of the American colonies against the oppressive British crown and the developing revolution in France were exciting to the Romantics.
- Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley all lost heart, however, because of the Reign of Terror in France and the rise of Napoleon as the French Emperor.
- The Romantic focus on the imagination was a direct response to 18th-century rationalism.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

"What if you slept, and what if in your sleep you dreamed, and what if in your dreams you went to heaven and there you plucked a strange and beautiful flower, and what if when you awoke you had the flower in your hand? Ah, what then?"

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
Biographia Literaria

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE was born October 21, 1772, the son of a vicar. When Coleridge was nine, his father died, and his mother sent him away to boarding school, often not allowing him to return home for holidays and vacations. As an adult, Coleridge would idealize his father, but his relationship with his mother would always be strained.

He attended Jesus College at Cambridge University, but never completed a degree, one time leaving school to join the military to escape a woman who had rejected him. While at university, Coleridge became friends with Robert Southey, and the two developed plans to establish a utopian commune in Pennsylvania. Coleridge and Southey married sisters Edith and Sarah Fricker, but Coleridge's marriage was never truly happy.

In 1793, Coleridge met and became instant friends with William Wordsworth. With Wordsworth, he wrote and published *Lyrical Ballads*. While Wordsworth contributed a greater *number* of poems to the work,

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner in Seven Parts

From *Lyrical Ballads*†

Facile credo, plures esse Naturas invisibiles quam visibiles in rerum universitate. Sed horum omnium familiam quis nobis enarrabit? et gradus et cognationes et discrimina et singulorum munera? Quid agunt? quae loca habitant? Harum rerum notitiam semper ambivit ingenium humanum, nunquam attigit. Juvat, interea, non diffiteor, quandoque in animo, tanquam in tabulâ, majoris et melioris mundi imaginem contemplari: ne mens assuefacta hodiernae vitae minutiis se contrahat nimis, et tota subsidat in pusillas cogitationes. Sed veritati interea invigilandum est, modusque servandus, ut certa ab incertis, diem a nocte, distinguamus. – T. Burnet, *Archaeol. Phil.*, p. 68†

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 Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country.

PART THE FIRST.

An ancient Mariner meeteth three gallants bidden to a wedding feast, and detaineth one.

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stoppest thou me?

"The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din."

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

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.

The Wedding-Guest is spell-bound by the eye of the old seafaring man, and constrained to hear his tale.

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 light-house top.

The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the Line.

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 Wedding-Guest heareth the bridal music; but the Mariner continueth his tale.

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.

The ship drawn by a storm toward the South Pole.

And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased 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.

The land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen.

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!

Till a great sea-bird, called the Albatross, came through the snow-fog, and was received with great joy and hospitality.

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 lo! the Albatross proveth a bird of good omen, and followeth the ship as it returned northward through fog and floating ice.

And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariners' hollo!

Glossary

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER IN SEVEN PARTS

Lyrical Ballads **–** the major work on which Coleridge and Wordsworth collaborated; its publication is usually credited with ushering in the Romantic Era.

"**Facile credo, plures**… ***Archaeol. Phil.*****, p. 68" –** [*Latin*] I well believe there to be more unseen natural things than visible in the universe of things. But who will explain to us all the families of these things? And the ranks and the relations and differentiating traits and the roles of each of them? What do they do? In what places do they live? Human knowledge has always circled around an understanding of such matters, but has never touched it. It helps, meanwhile, I do not deny, to consider in the mind, just as upon a tablet, the picture of a bigger and better world: that no mind accustomed to the minutia of today's life might draw itself together too much, and totally sink down into unimportant meditations. But meanwhile, one should be devoted to the truth, and order should be preserved, that we may distinguish certain from uncertain and day from night.

the Line – the equator; the imaginary line on the earth that separates the Northern and Southern Hemispheres

PART THE FIRST.

"**Till over the mast at noon**" **–** Be careful to note when the Mariner has stopped speaking and the narrator begins.

Albatross – a large sea bird; before the publication of this poem, there was no superstition about killing albatrosses, and they were often killed as food for the sailors. There was, however, some belief that an albatross was the reincarnated soul of a sailor lost at sea.

vespers nine – a religious service; evening prayers performed at nine o'clock; readers should note that Coleridge uses the number nine at least three times in this poem.

PART THE SECOND.

"**As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean.**" **–** This is one of the most famous similes and images in English literature. The couplet that follows about there being nothing to drink while surrounded by vast amounts of water is also quite famous.

"**…Of the spirit…the land of mist and snow.**" **–** The spirit of the slain albatross is "swimming" nine fathoms beneath the ship and has done so since the Mariner killed it somewhere near the South Pole. A fathom is equal to six feet.

Vocabulary

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER IN SEVEN PARTS

thence – from there

PART THE FIRST.
Eftsoons – soon afterwards; quickly
kirk – a church
ken – [Old English] see; know, understand
swound – a fainting spell
wherefore – why

PART THE SECOND.
averred – asserted, insisted

PART THE THIRD.
clombe – climbed
Gramercy! – an expression of gratitude
twain – the two crew members, male and female
weal – well-being
wist – to know, believe

PART THE FOURTH.
alway – always
hoar-frost – a light coating of frost or frozen dew
spectre-bark – a ghostly ship

PART THE FIFTH.
corses – corpses
nought – nothing
sere – withered, dry
silly – useless
wont – accustomed to

PART THE SIXTH.
perforce – by necessity
shrieve – variant form of *shrive*, to hear confession and offer absolution

PART THE SEVENTH.
aught – anything
tod – a heavy mass
trow – to think, suppose