

# THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

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These questions are adapted from Richard E. Matlak: "40 Questions to ask of *Ancient Mariner*" in *Approaches to Teaching Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, New York: MLA, 1991

Come to class with a detailed understanding of the poem. The following questions will guide you in your note-taking. Don't miss the discussion questions at the end of the page.

## Part 1

- Why does the Mariner stop "one of three"—in other words, that particular wedding guest?
- Why does the Mariner prevent a man from attending a wedding? Is a comment being made on wedding celebration in comparison with other experience?
- How does the Mariner stop "one of three"?
- What does moon-sun/night day have to do with the story? What kind of things happens under those planets or at those times of day?
- In what terms is the setting out of the ship described?
- Why do the mariners hail the bird as a Christian soul?
- How does the bird relate to the mariners?
- Why does the Mariner shoot the albatross?
- Is his act premeditated?

## Part 2

- Why do the mariners change their minds about the value of the bird?
- What does the Mariner's not being able to speak signify?
- What's the significance of drought and idleness?
- Why does the crew hang the albatross around the Mariner's neck?
- What does the bird have to do with the cross? Why should it be related to the cross?

## Part 3

- What is the "spectre-bark"? Who is on it? Is it really there? How do you know? Who else sees it? How do you know?
- What does the act of rolling dice to determine fate mean about the nature of justice in the Mariner's universe? Or, if you believe the scene is a hallucination, what does rolling dice mean about the nature of justice in the mariner's mind?
- Why is justice an issue? What have the mariners done to deserve their fate?
- Why does the Mariner get the punishment he does?
- Why does everyone die but the mariner? Why are their deaths compared to "the whiz of my crossbow"?

## Part 4

Why is the Mariner made to suffer in the particular way described? How is his suffering related to his shooting of the bird?

Why does he compare himself to the snakes he describes?

Why can't he pray?

What causes his change of perception of the snakes?

Why does a spring of love gush from his heart? What does it mean that he is blessed by the water snakes "unawares"? How can he be unaware when performing what is by definition an intentional act? How and why does his saint get involved in this act?

Why can he now pray?

Why does the bird fall off his neck?

Why does it sink "like lead"?

## Part 5

Why can the Mariner now sleep? Is he forgiven?

Why is the dryness removed with water?

Why does the Mariner feel like a ghost?

Why does the air burst into life?

Why do the men arise from the dead? Are they forgiven?

Why is there music imagery?

What does the spirit's loving the bird who loved the man have to do with anything?

Why will the Mariner do more penance? Does the continued penance mean more than that the spirit cannot be repaid for his loss?

## Part 6

Why hasn't the curse died away?

Why can't the Mariner pray again? Did he ever change?

Why do the men die again? Did they ever change? Speaking of death and rebirth, where's the bird?

Why does the Mariner think the Hermit can shrive him? Does the Hermit do this?

## Part 7

Why does the ship go down like lead? Is it associated with the sinking of the albatross?

Why does the Mariner have to tell his tale before he is relieved? Or is "forgiven" the better word?

Why does the need to tell the tale return? Why does the need come on spontaneously?

Why is it sweeter for the Mariner to pray with the congregations than to attend a wedding feast?

Why is the Wedding Guest now sadder but wiser? What in fact has he learned?

If the moral is as beautifully simple as "He prayeth best who loveth well," what's this poor fellow doing wandering the earth, unforgiven, forever? Why hasn't he been forgiven? Is he wrong about his moral if his life doesn't confirm it? Is he wrong about other things too?

## Glosses

What is the point of the poem's glosses? To what extent did they help you understand the poem?

## General Questions:

This poem is often read as a Christian allegory of sin and redemption. What meaning comes out of reading the character and events as Christian symbols? Is this reading satisfactory?

What are the major differences between the early and later versions of the poem? What's your response to the shorter narrative and archaic language of the earlier poem?

This poem is, if nothing else, a story about being told a story. Looked at from this perspective, what does the poem say about why and how we tell stories?

The ancient mariner suffers; that much we know. What does this poem say about the nature of suffering and our attempts to transcend it.

How does this poem make sense in the context of The Lyrical Ballads. How is it similar to other poems we've read by Wordsworth? Why do you think it was initially chosen to be the opening and hence introductory poem of the volume?