

Elements of crime writing: Text overview – *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Read our overview which shows how you can consider *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in relation to the genre of Crime writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview – a crime of some magnitude and its consequences

Central to the story Coleridge tells through the Mariner is a crime which is so terrible it disturbs the spirits from the land of mist and snow, who then seek vengeance on the man who shoots the albatross. This event, which happens in Part 1 of the narrative, is referred to in all seven parts. The consequences of the Mariner's crime are used by Coleridge to structure the text. The mariner's action of shooting the albatross is the catalyst for the disasters that befall him and his crew. After this, all aspects of his behaviour mark him as a criminal experiencing guilt and remorse. Like Macbeth, he feels his actions have cut him off from God and he cannot pray: "I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;

But or ever a prayer had gushed,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust".

He feels the agony of his isolation; he cannot appreciate nature and is disgusted by the water snakes which he calls 'slimy things'. Later on his journey, although he is able to bless the 'happy living things' and in the 'self-same moment' is able to pray, his agony does not end. When he meets the holy Hermit, he begs to be shriven and at the end of the poem, his actions lead him to wandering the land like Cain.

Transgression

The Mariner clearly transgresses against nature and the life force (the 'One Life' principle): in shooting the bird he disrupts universal order. The Mariner and the crew could also be said to transgress when they go on their voyage of discovery (they 'were the first that ever burst into that silent sea') as they are pushing the boundaries, perhaps like Frankenstein, playing God. In both respects the Mariner could be said to be committing crimes against God. In a sense, he worships himself as a false God – breaking another of the Ten Commandments. The

shooting of the albatross (the Christian soul) could also be seen as an allegorical murder of Christ. The Mariner also breaks the 'social laws' of the ship which demand that men work together, eat together and pray together – activities shared, and presided over, by the albatross until the Mariner randomly shoots it.

Moral Framework

The story has a moral framework, a typical feature of crime writing, in which the Mariner has to learn the enormity of his crime. The text itself supports a good, obedient life and condemns those who challenge or disrupt moral boundaries. The Mariner is condemned for his bad actions and he learns his lesson to be a God-fearing citizen, one who goes to church with others in the religious community and bends his will to the great father. The wedding guest also becomes a wiser man 'the morrow morn', as he too learns a moral lesson.

Settings

The setting for the crime is a remote place, the South Pole, far away from civilisation. But other settings are also relevant to the crime story: the ship and the ocean, the equator, the Mariner's home country, the wood where the hermit lives and the church – the backdrop for the whole story, reinforcing and moral and religious framework.

Guilt

The Mariner's guilt is heard through the voice that delivers the narrative, and after the shooting of the albatross, the poem's story focuses on the Mariner's recognition that he has 'done a hellish thing'. He stops the wedding guest because he is filled with a 'woeful agony' which assaults him from time to time. His guilt drives him to tell his tale and he explains at the end that the recurring need to unburden his guilt is the pattern of his life: his heart will burn until his ghastly tale is told.

Violence

The killing of the albatross is an act of violence against nature and a random act of murder. If the poem is seen as allegorical, the killing of the albatross could represent the killing of Christ and/or Cain's killing of Abel.

Motives and their absence

The Mariner's motives for the killing of the albatross are interesting as there are none, but much could be said about the randomness of the killing. The randomness could signify man's arrogance, his seeing himself as being at the centre of the universe, and his thoughtless destruction of other living things.

Pursuit of the criminal

There is also no obvious 'detection' here; but if the notion of detection is expanded to include those who pursue the criminal with an eye to bringing him to justice, then the Mariner is pursued by the spirits from the land of mist and snow, the inhabitants of the Life in Death ship, the Voices who comment on the Mariner's 'wrong' and his inner belief that he is being pursued by 'a frightful fiend' who treads close behind him.

Punishment and confession

The punishment the Mariner receives is severe and is used by Coleridge to structure the story. The Mariner's need to tell his story is the ongoing part of his punishment, but his punishment can also be seen in his isolation, his crew members' accusation of him, the bizarre movements of the ship, his belief that he is being followed, the hostility of nature and God, the meeting with Life in Death, the death of the crew members, their ghostly return to life, the ship's going down like lead, the call to be shriven and his recurring agony. Confession on a simple level is the Mariner's entreating of the Hermit 'O shrieve me, shrieve me holy man', but his telling of his tale is an extended confession.

Victims

The albatross is a victim, a symbol of goodness and hospitality. The crew could also be seen as victims, as could the pilot and the pilot's boy. It can also be argued that the hapless wedding guest is a victim, forced to miss the wedding celebration.

Suffering

There is much suffering in the tale: the Mariner and crew being without water at the equator, the Mariner being cut off from God, and then, from time to time, being wrenched with a woeful agony.

Accusation

There is accusation in the poem when the crew accuses the Mariner – 'Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, / That made the breeze to blow', but having accused him they then condone his actions ('Twas right said they...!') making themselves accomplices, another key aspect of crime writing.

Trial

The nature of the poem and the strange supernatural world that Coleridge creates do not contain any sense of a conventional trial, but what happens to the Mariner is a kind of trial (the spirits/voices act as judges: 'the man hath penance done and penance more will do').

Justice / injustice

A very harsh justice operates in the world of the Ancient Mariner according to some: all this punishment for killing a bird; but then if the bird represents the life force then there is justice, because the Mariner commits a terrible act.