

2010

The fiends that plague thee thus: An examination of gender and the role it plays in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Kathleen Tyer

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.emich.edu/theses>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tyer, Kathleen, "The fiends that plague thee thus: An examination of gender and the role it plays in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" (2010). *Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations*. 368.

<http://commons.emich.edu/theses/368>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses, and Doctoral Dissertations, and Graduate Capstone Projects at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

The Fiends that Plague Thee Thus:
An Examination of Gender and the Role it plays in
Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

by

Kathleen Tyer

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Literature

Thesis Committee:

Christine Neufeld, PhD, Chair

Laura George, PhD

Andrea Kaston-Tange, PhD

May 14, 2010

Ypsilanti, Michigan

Dedication

This thesis truly was a labor of love. I hated writing and researching this work at times, but I always truly loved, appreciated, and believed in the topic I had chosen. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I'm sure, both loved and hated his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a ballad that he revised for almost twenty years. It only took me two years to research and write this, so in no way can I claim Coleridge's dedication, but that might be what makes me love his work so much – it truly must have been a labor of love for Coleridge, just as this work was the culmination of my love of literature and language.

I need to thank some people for their support and occasional nagging. Mom and Dad, thank you for supporting me in everything that I do. You are my heroes. I also have to thank Randy, my blue-eyed muse. Without you, in collaboration with my mother, I probably never would have been goaded into putting my thoughts down on paper finally. Thank you, all three of you, for your love and support.

Finally, I promised my AP Literature class of 2010 that I would mention them in this dedication. Thank you for reading and editing my Proposal, which you tore apart. It was a very humbling experience. Thank you also for putting up with me as I frantically tried to write this thesis. You inspire me each and every day and make me remember why I love my job so much.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of you who have loved me and believed in me – I love you too. Enjoy!

Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was, and remains today, one of the most important literary figures in history, and his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* continues to be one of the most widely read pieces of literature in schools across the world. When it was first published, the poem was ahead of its time and was widely misinterpreted. For the past two hundred years, even, critical examinations of the poem have tended to reveal discrepancies rather than attempt to explain them. This work examines the poem through the lens of queer theory in an attempt to explain those apparent inconsistencies. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has central, if disregarded, radical gender formulations, that, when highlighted, will help explain more fully the poetic closure of the poem and Coleridge's decisions regarding the revision of his famous rime.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Introduction and Background.....	1
Chapter 1: Critical Analysis.....	9
Strange Powers of Speech.....	10
With a Woeful Agony Which Forced Me to Begin my Tale.....	13
An It Were a Christian Soul.....	16
Four Times Fifty Living Men.....	20
Chapter 2: The Story.....	22
He Shone Bright.....	26
The Albatross About My Neck Was Hung.....	28
That Woman and her Mate.....	33
And I Bless'd Them Unaware.....	38
Alone on the Wide, Wide Sea.....	41
Chapter 3: The Structure.....	46
My Ghastly Adventure.....	47
He Cannot Chuse but Hear.....	48
It is an Ancyent Marinere.....	55
The Pious Bird of Good Omen.....	59
Conclusion.....	68
Works Cited.....	73

Introduction and Background

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was first published in 1798 to negative review both by the general readership and by William Wordsworth, Coleridge's close friend and literary instigator for the poem. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was first conceived by Coleridge and Wordsworth, together with Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, as they were walking through the British countryside. As Wordsworth published in 1843, "In the Spring of the year 1798 [Coleridge], my Sister, and myself started from Alfoxden, pretty late in the afternoon, with a view to visit Linton and the Valley of Stones near it, and as our united funds were very small, we agreed to defray the expense of the tour by writing a Poem to be sent to the New Monthly Magazine...Accordingly we set off...and in the course of this walk was planned the Poem of the Ancient Mariner" (Owen vii). *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was first published in 1798 in a collection of poetry entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection arranged by Wordsworth. Coleridge's poem occupied the eminently prestigious first place in the collection. Apparently both Wordsworth and Coleridge had high hopes for the poem, but it was not well received by critics. Most critics writing on the collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, praised Coleridge's style but condemned his message as confusing or incoherent. Dr. Charles Burney in his literary criticism, published in *Monthly Review* in 1799, writes,

The author's first piece, the *Rime of the anycent marinere*, in imitation of the style as well as the spirit of the elder poets, is the strangest story of a cock and bull that we ever saw on paper: yet, though it seems a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence, (of which we do not perceive the drift, unless the joke lies in depriving the wedding guest of his share of the feast,) there are in it poetical touches of an exquisite kind. (Reiman 714)

Burney, while praising the lyricism of the poetry itself, offers a sardonic attack of the Mariner's story and the fact that the meaning of the poem seems obscure, or "unintelligible."

Similarly, and citing the same advertisement, Robert Southey, in his article for *Critical Review* in 1798, asserts that the poem is "a ballad (says the advertisement) professedly written in imitation of the style, as well as of the spirit of the elder poets. We are tolerably conversant with the early English poets and can discover no resemblance whatever, except in antiquated spelling and a few obsolete words" (Reiman 308). He goes on to add that "many of the stanzas are labouriously beautiful; but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible... We do not sufficiently understand the story to analyze it... Genius has here been employed in producing a poem of little merit" (Reiman 308-309). Both critics, Burney and Southey, admit a certain confusion with the story itself but seem to admire the lyricism of the poem itself, if not the advertisement that the poem is an imitation of earlier poetry. This seems to mirror the general confused and negative reception of the poem. Even Sara Coleridge, Coleridge's wife, admitted in a letter in March of 1799, "The Lyrical Ballads are laughed at and disliked by all with very few excepted" (Jackson 61), showing the unpopular reception of the collection of poetry in *Lyrical Ballads*, of which *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was a part.

Wordsworth, Coleridge's close friend and literary peer, also found fault with the poem. Wordsworth, in a note added to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, asserted that the poem "has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character...; secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon; thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the

imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated” (Owen 214-215). Wordsworth was not the only person to believe that the events “do not produce each other” and seem to have no purpose. Most critics argued that the poem failed as a supernatural and Romantic endeavor and that the poetic closure of the poem did not successfully conclude the moral questions introduced in the text as a whole. Several critics cited the end of the poem, specifically the stanza reading:

He prayeth well who loveth well,
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best who loveth best,
All things both great and small:
For the dear God, who loveth us,
He made and loveth all (659-664).

For many critics, while this stanza offers a definitive moral conclusion about Christianity and the importance of prayer, the poem itself tends to offer more ambiguous values.

Even the killing of the Albatross at the end of Part I simply reads “with my cross bow / I shot the Albatross” (79-80). There is no judgment upon the action. Yet, because of the Mariner’s actions, all of the seamen aboard the ship die as retribution. Everyone around the Mariner is punished for the Mariner’s actions, but he lives. Thus, the ethical implications of the poem appear to be contradictory, and the conclusion seems to have no relevant connection to the moral values offered in the poem.

The poetic closure is not actually contradictory to the rest of the poem and the Mariner’s actions if the poem is read using queer theory. Using such a lens directs attention away from the antiquated spelling that critics found fault with, the lyricism and structure of the poem that critics admired, the supernatural events that seemed to confuse even Wordsworth, and the paradoxical nature of the poetic closure that critics highlighted

upon its reception. Reading this poem, using queer theory as an impetus, as an allegory for self-discovery in a homosocial world away from the physical and moral limitations on land, allows the inconsistencies in the text to be embraced rather than rejected as an impediment to the text. The fact that although Coleridge revised his poem for the next twenty years but failed to alter a single word of his poetic closure, arguably the most criticized portion of his poem, reveals that Coleridge thought his ending a fitting conclusion to the moral questions brought up in the Mariner's story.

There was so much public denunciation after the publication of the poem in 1798 that Coleridge re-introduced an edited version, complete with a Gloss, in *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817. However, it is important to note that despite all the criticism over the last few stanzas of his original poem, Coleridge chose not to delete or change the controversial stanzas that contained the moral conclusion. Traditionally, the poetic closure is one of the most influential parts of a work – it simultaneously reiterates the author's point and often leaves the reader with something to think about. Coleridge chose not to change his poetic closure because he arguably thought it an adequate conclusion for the moral message of the rest of the poem. Sadly, most criticism, both older and more contemporary, either glosses over the conclusion as being ineffectual or ignores it completely. Even John Livingston Lowes, in one of the most influential books on the poem, seems to gloss over the conclusion. He writes about “the Mariner's valedictory piety, which does, I fear, warrant Coleridge's (and our own) regret” (Lowes 302). Even Lowes misses the root of Coleridge's poem, which is an allegory of self-discovery, and dismisses it as an unfortunate addition to the literary work.

Although Coleridge made many additions over the next twenty years to the original text, such as the deletion of multiple stanzas and the introduction of a gloss¹, the poem was primarily seen as a failed Christian allegory for over two hundred years; because of the arbitrary killing of the Albatross and the punishment of the crew for the Mariner's sin, the moral of the poem seems an unfitting conclusion for the poem as a whole. Ironically, the belated gloss seems to offer no additional insight into the true intentions of the poet. Although Coleridge made many changes to his poem, he never altered the moral of the poem, which was one of the most criticized parts of the ballad. However, this moral seems a fitting conclusion if the entirety of the poem is read through the lens of queer theory²; the mariner's struggle then becomes not a struggle for God's forgiveness, but rather a struggle for self-knowledge and acceptance. My thesis will offer a reconsideration of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* through the lens of queer theory; more specifically it will examine the homosocial³ world in which the story takes place, the role of the castrating female figure (Life-in-Death), the phallic symbol of the water snake, the Freudian implications of the Albatross, the objectification of the Mariner's gaze, the role of the Wedding Guest, and the framework of the poem within the confines of a heterosexual marriage.

¹ A gloss is an explanation by means of a marginal note; Coleridge added his Gloss in 1817, nearly 20 years after the initial publication of the poem

² Queer theory is an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality.

³ The term "homosocial" refers to an environment that is peopled primarily with men, and an exploration of such an environment looks at the male bonds (not necessarily homosexual) that are formed as a result. The Mariner's environment is a ship peopled with other seamen – male seamen.

Although readings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's lyrical ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* have spanned a gamut of literary angles, from the role of the Wedding-Guest to the function of the Gloss, much of the analysis for the past two hundred years has been focused on the Christian allusions in the poem and more recently on the function of the ballad as a Romantic text. Critical discussion of the poem has continued to take place, but it has stayed within certain realms, namely that of Christian allusions and the Romantic canon. Gender theory has been used to explore some of Coleridge's other poems, particularly "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel," but very little exploration has been done with regard to gender and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and no analysis has been done in terms of queer theory and the poem.

The whole journey of the Mariner can be seen as his struggle to accept himself and his true homosexual identity. (He must fight against society by both loving and being repulsed by the bodies of the seamen.) He must wear the Albatross, the symbol of non-gender or androgyny, around his neck as his own personal burden. He is forced to wander the world alone forever telling his story, with a feminine other conspicuously absent. It is only at the end of the poem that the Mariner comes to terms with himself, and his final understanding is that of Christian love. He learns that he must love and accept everybody, "Both man and bird and beast," himself, his true self, and his flesh. The moral contradiction, a contradiction that critical discussion has suggested, between the conclusion of the poem and the body of the poem is actually not contradictory at all but reminiscent of the Mariner's struggle for self-acceptance. Perhaps the moral of the story is that the Mariner does not need a feminine other, nor a masculine one, because he knows who he really is, and he feels that God has truly accepted him for who he really is.

This interpretation allows the moral ambiguity to be embraced, rather than ignored or censured for being an encumbrance to the text.

This particular framework bridges a significant gap in the contemporary analysis of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and it also fits into recent literary developments. Analyzing the poem using queer theory will introduce more material to the contemporary literary discussion. By performing a close reading of the poem using a queer lens, I hope to begin to fill in some of the questions that have heretofore gone unanswered, or poorly answered, by traditional, and even more current, theoretical interpretations.

This project will develop in three chapters. The first chapter will explore traditional interpretations and will elucidate their pitfalls. The chapter will focus on traditional interpretations of the poem: the inconsistencies with reading this poem as a traditional piece of Romantic poetry, the futility of reading the poem as an autobiography, and the flaws in the Christian allegorical readings. This chapter will attempt to set up the questions and holes that will be filled in by my analysis in the subsequent chapters and will also introduce the precedence of gender explorations in Coleridge's other lyrical poems.

The second chapter will fully develop the analysis of the poem through queer theory. I will analyze the homosocial world of the seamen and of the isolation from the gendered norms on shore. I will also focus on the genders of the natural world and the non-gender of the Albatross (the Freudian implications which were briefly introduced above will also be explored in more depth). This will naturally lead into the discussion of the only female figure in the poem, Life-in-Death, a castrating female figure who takes on masculine attributes rather than a true feminine representation of the late 1700s. In

addition, the symbol of the water snake as phallic symbol and the implications of the blessing will be examined. All of this will be analyzed in light of the poetic closure of the poem and what this interpretation means to the overall discussion of the poem in the larger contemporary literary arena.

The third chapter will again focus a close reading of the text, but this chapter will focus on the structure of the poem. I will analyze the reasons for the addition of the Gloss and the re-edition of the poem in 1817 and what this means for the text overall. I will also discuss the four voices in the text and how they are necessary textual constructs, each bearing a distinctive character and each comprising a different agenda, offering a complexity to the poem that further explains the poetic closure. Going off of this idea, I will explore the important and often-overlooked relationship between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, namely the objectification of the Mariner's gaze and the realization of the Wedding-Guest at the end of the story. This chapter will also explore the framework of the poem within the confines of the symbol of a heterosexual union, the marriage.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was, and remains today, one of the most important literary figures in history. His poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* continues to be one of the most widely read pieces of literature in schools across the world. When it was first published the poem was ahead of its time and was widely misinterpreted and the poetic closure overlooked or undervalued. For the past two hundred years, even, critical examinations of the poem have tended to reveal inconsistencies rather than attempt to explain them. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has central, if disregarded, radical gender formulations, that, when highlighted, will help explain more fully the moral of the poem and Coleridge's decisions regarding the revision of his famous rime.

Chapter 1: Critical Analysis

Although *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is one of the most celebrated Romantic texts, it is also one of the most mysterious in terms of purpose and meaning, and so has been analyzed again and again for over two hundred years. While there are a myriad of conclusions about the poem in existence, the discussion has tended to be centered on a few main topics: the Romantic canon, Christian allegory, and autobiographical tendencies. By exploring both the current and more traditional conversations about the poem, I will highlight the controversy that exists about certain elements of the poem, controversy that will be explained, using queer theory, in the rest of this dissertation.

These ambiguities can be best countered when considered from the lens of queer theory. The whole journey of the Mariner can be seen as his struggle to accept himself and his true homosexual identity. He must fight against society by both loving and being repulsed by the bodies of the seamen. He must wear the Albatross, the symbol of non-gender or androgyny, around his neck as his own personal burden. It is only at the end of the poem, after he associates himself with the phallic symbol of the water snake, that the Mariner comes to terms with himself, and his final understanding is that of love. He learns that he must love and accept everybody “Both man and bird and beast,” or himself, his true self, and his flesh. The moral contradiction that critics bring up between the conclusion of the poem and the body of the poem is actually not contradictory at all but reminiscent of the Mariner’s struggle for self-acceptance. This interpretation allows the moral contradictions to be embraced, rather than ignored or censured for being an encumbrance to the text.

Strange Powers of Speech

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner has taken on a more central role in contemporary discussions about Romantic poetry recently. However, theorists seem to disagree as to the function of the Romantic elements within the poem itself, and this has created quite a controversial dialogue. Both Robert Penn Warren and Anne Mellor, although they are unlikely allies, one being a well-known writer and one a New Critic, seem to agree that the poetic brilliance of Coleridge lies in the tension between his religious and Romantic authorial beliefs. Although both critics seem to agree on the source of Coleridge's skill, they fail to tackle the question of the significance of the poetic closure of the work and the intrinsic tension within. In doing that, both authors do not praise Coleridge fully and for his complete work and thus do not fully understand his creative intellect. They both point out the conflict inherent in the poem by the juxtaposition of the supernatural with the religious, but by ignoring the conclusion, they devalue the work as a whole, an oversight that this paper will attempt to rectify later using queer theory. Viewed through such a lens, the tension only further explains the Mariner's internal struggle for self-acceptance in an isolated and lawless space.

Robert Penn Warren in his essay "A Poem of Pure Imagination" explores the anxiety between Coleridge's "One Life,"⁴ which is the sacramental story of crime and punishment, and the Romantic imaginative power. For Warren, the killing of the Albatross is a sin against God because the seamen hailed the bird "in God's name." This action sends the Mariner into a world of the Imagination, a world where the sunlight and

⁴ For Coleridge, the human mind and the natural world are often linked as part of the "One Life," a creative force that can connect the dissimilar aspects of reality into something that can be perceived by the creative intellect

the moonlight have judgmental powers. The sunlight represents evil as the crime, taking place during the daylight, causing a change in the direction of the ship and the fate of the Mariner and the crew. The moonlight reveals the ghostly crew as a symbol of the Romantic imagination inherent in the poem. Although Warren writes that “the fusion of the theme of the ‘One Life’ and the theme of the imagination is the expression in the poem of Coleridge’s general belief concerning the relation of truth and poetry, of morality and beauty” (42), he later goes on to explain that the Mariner’s wandering sets him apart from society and makes him an outcast. Warren is essentially saying that the juxtaposition of religious beliefs and the imaginative story has left the Mariner cursed. Warren explains this as a “peculiar and paradoxical situation: the poem is a poem in which the poetic imagination appears in a regenerative and healing capacity, but in the end the hero, who has, presumably, been healed, appears in one of his guises as the poète maudit. So we learn that the imagination does not only bless, for even as it blesses it lays on a curse” (44).

Just like Warren, Anne Mellor, in *English Romantic Irony*, sees the poem as the product of the tension, or irony, between Coleridge’s creative “Free Life” of creative imagination and his religious upbringing. Mellor argues that Coleridge wanted to create a poem that embodied the chaos of the supernatural. This can be seen, according to Mellor, in the seemingly unpredictable actions of the universe. Mellor questions why the Mariner stops three wedding guests, why he can stop a guest with simply his “glittering eye,” why the crew vacillates between condemnation and praise of the Mariner’s action, why the crew is punished for the Mariner’s crime, and how the Mariner’s fate can be decided by the roll of a dice. Coleridge introduced the gloss, according to Mellor,

because he was uncomfortable with the lack of a moral and logical outcome of the story. Thus, for Mellor, the gloss becomes a neutral third voice in the poem, next to the Wedding Guest and the Mariner, a voice that offers a moral and an organization to the events of the poem. Mellor points out the inconsistencies in the poem and the tone of the gloss in order to show the tension that Coleridge has infused into the poem, a tension that is the root of the genius of the poem. Mellor embraces the inconsistencies in the text as embodiments of that tension, saying, "The poem and the gloss together continue to manifest Coleridge's painful recognition that a Christian theology fails to explain every aspect of the observable or psychological world" (149). Mellor highlights the contradictions in order to explore the tension within the poem as the impetus of Coleridge's genius, but she does not attempt to answer the contradictions, as this paper will do.

Mellor, then, like Warren, points out the discrepancies in the poem in order to explore Coleridge's own personal tension, a tension that exists between religious beliefs and creative imagination. The two authors, from varying time periods and critical backgrounds, differ on many points: namely, the role of the natural world as either judgmental or unpredictable. However, both authors point out the conflict between Coleridge's creative Romantic power and his theological beliefs, which seems to be a staple of Romantic genius. It is important to note, however, that in embracing the inconsistencies, both authors fail to answer those critics who see the poem as an unsuccessful allegory in terms of religious morality.

With a Woeful Agony Which Forced Me to Begin my Tale

Some critics have attempted to analyze the poem and explain the discrepancies using information about Coleridge's life, but they, too, have fallen short of a full explanation of the strange events that as Wordsworth said, "do not produce each other." In the essay "The Mariner and the Albatross" George Whalley postulates that the Mariner's loneliness is a literary representation of Coleridge's own loneliness, and the Albatross represents Coleridge's creative imagination; killing the Albatross then represents the atrophy of Coleridge's creative imagination from the use of, and addiction to, opium. Meyer Abrams furthers this theory about opium addiction in his early essay entitled "The Milk of Paradise" in which he sets forth the claims that Coleridge's opium addiction fueled his creative spirit in part for the genesis of the dream-like sequences in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* but more importantly for *Kubla Khan*. David Miall also explores the effects of Coleridge's father's death on the unexplained moral question of guilt and death in the poem, but he falls short of actually saying that the poem is an allegory for Coleridge's struggles with his father's death, saying instead that the symbol of the Albatross represents "a clue rather to what Coleridge lost as a child at his father's death, a symbol of his own protected state of innocence" (652). While these autobiographical interpretations are theoretically sound when the poem is taken as a whole, the articles fail to fully answer and explain the moral implications that the poem introduces but does not seem to answer. John Livingston Lowes's insights into Coleridge's sources of the poem, namely travel books and popular ballads, cannot be overlooked, but they also do not offer much depth of explanation for the ambiguities of

the poem as a whole. In fact, Lowes downplays the end of the ballad as an unfortunate moral consequence rather than embracing the inconsistencies as this paper will do.

George Whalley in his essay “The Mariner and the Albatross” published in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner* presents, arguably, the most insightful analysis into the autobiographical threads present in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but it, too, lacks clear and specific detailed analysis about the poem itself. Whalley’s interpretation, while thought-provoking, makes general connections between the text and Coleridge’s life and seems to stray away from direct textual analysis. Whalley himself says, “As far as I know the *Ancient Mariner* has never been interpreted as a personal allegory. To do so (and the evidence for it is weighty) not only gives a clue to the poem’s intensity but also explains beyond cavil its moral implications” (90). He also urges the reader not to let any interpretations take away from the integrity of the poem itself, but admits that although the poem was not intended as an allegory, the introduction of the Gloss in 1817 invites the reader to view it as such. Whalley postulates that the loneliness the Mariner feels is an allegory for Coleridge’s own loneliness, and the albatross is a symbol, whether consciously or unconsciously, of the atrophy of Coleridge’s creative imagination as a result of his opium addiction.

Whalley, in connecting the Mariner’s loneliness to Coleridge’s own sense of isolation, makes an unarguable association between the figure of Life-in-Death and Coleridge’s handwritten epitaph, which reads, “Lift one thought in prayer for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, / That He, who many a toilsome breath / Found Death in Life, may here find Life in Death” (75). Whalley makes connections between the Mariner’s lonely wanderings and Coleridge’s life, arguing that Coleridge’s life didn’t fall into stages of

productivity, but rather that he was lonely and unhappy his whole life. Although he seemed at times happy, that the final version of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* represents to Coleridge “the outcome of at least twenty years of reflection, no matter how sporadic the reflection may have been. That can only mean that the poem continued to hold for him the personal significance with which it was charged at its creation” and the “symbolism has been sharpened, not least of all, by the gloss” (83). Whalley also argues in his essay that the killing of the albatross mirrors Coleridge’s opium addiction and therefore the killing of the albatross is a metaphor for the atrophy of Coleridge’s creative imagination (89). Whalley writes, “The *Ancient Mariner*, in addition to its other unique qualities, is both an unconscious projection of Coleridge’s earlier sufferings and a vivid prophecy of the sufferings that were to follow” (90), but he doesn’t really support this assertion with direct textual evidence. Thus, Whalley’s argument for autobiographical connections is interesting and useful but should not be used to argue the meaning of the poem as his claims seem to pick and choose certain textual passages for support. There are noteworthy connections made between Coleridge’s life and the poem itself, but due to the lack of in-depth textual analysis of the purpose and meaning of the poem as a whole, the autobiographical claim falls short of explaining the poem in its entirety, nor does it answer the questions posed by critics about the purpose of the poem.

An It Were a Christian Soul

Although critics have toyed with the autobiographical connection, most of the criticism for the past two hundred years has explored the religious implications of the text. There is no doubt that the poem contains Christian suggestions, namely the albatross being hung around the neck like a cross, the Mariner's blessing of the water snakes as a symbol of prayer and Christian love, and the Mariner as a symbol for the Wandering Jew, but critics who see this poem as a Christian allegory still have trouble coming to a concise conclusion about the morality of the poem. Meyer Abrams, one of the most well known critics of literature of the Romantic era, while still discussing Coleridge's role in Romantic poetry, veers towards a religious explanation within a Romantic circular framework in his book *Natural Supernaturalism*. He attempts to explain *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a religious allegory of man's fall from grace, the division of the self, the circuitous journey towards redemption, and the Mariner's change of heart. Meyers writes that, "the persistent religious and moral allusions...both in the text and in the glosses which Coleridge added to assist the bewildered readers of the first published version, invite us to take the Mariner's experience as an instance of the Christian plot of moral error, the discipline of suffering, and a consequent change of heart. The Mariner's literal voyage, then, is also a spiritual journey" (272). He cites the following textual events as examples of the religious intent of the poem: the narrative is set within a framework of a wedding, which is the ultimate Christian sacrament; the Mariner selects one of three guests, and this references the Biblical parable of three; killing the albatross shows the Mariner's prideful belief in his own self-sufficiency, because the crew hails the bird "as if it had been a Christian soul" but the Mariner shoots

the bird and so turns away from God's love and the beliefs of his crew; the Mariner blesses the snakes because the moon shines on them both and he realizes that he is a part of a larger community; and his penance for his actions is to pass "like night, from land to land" telling his story. In his explanation, Abrams glosses over the disparity between the crew's actions and their subsequent deaths and the Mariner's actions with his punishment, an area of contention among other critics. Perhaps he deliberately chooses to not address the two questions because they are so difficult to explain using the Christian belief in God's love and His moral code.

John Livingston Lowes also fails to adequately explain the morality of the poem, instead focusing on Coleridge's historical inspirations. Arguably the most recognized Coleridge critic, Lowes explores the archetypal image of the Wandering Jew in 18th century literature in his novel *The Road to Xanadu*, and that image as the basis for Coleridge's ancient Mariner. Lowes picks specifically the two lines of the poem, "I pass, like night, from land to land; / I have strange powers of speech;" (586-587) to show that "the Wedding-Guest is not the first who cannot choose but hear, nor for all we know, is this, more than another land, the Mariner's 'own countree,' nor its native tongue his native speech" (252). Lowes argues that Coleridge's Mariner is an amalgamation of the archetype of the Wandering Jew and a sailor. While Lowes' research is difficult to deny, his assertion that the conclusion of Coleridge's poem is ineffectual certainly needs to be argued. He writes about "the Mariner's valedictory piety, which does, I fear, warrant Coleridge's (and our own) regret" (302). He goes on to conclude that "the events in a dream do not produce each other, but they seem to. And that is the sole requirement of the action of the poem" (303). Lowes' monumental study looks at the many sources of

Coleridge's ideas for the poem, but he warns the reader against reading too deeply into the poem because "to interpret the drift of the *Ancient Mariner* as didactic in its intention is to stultify both Coleridge and one's self" (299). Lowes sees the ballad as an exercise in pure imagination, but Lowes, along with many other critics commenting on the poem for the past two hundred years, misses the crux of Coleridge's poem, a crux that Coleridge refused to change despite public condemnation.

Anne Mellor also points out inconsistencies at the end of the poem as an example of Romantic irony. She writes that, "the Mariner's simple pious credo – "the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all" – stands in unresolved opposition to his fate: to pass from land to land, like the eternally cursed, Wandering Jew, constantly reliving almost unendurable agonies for no rational or acceptably Christian moral reason. For could a God "who made and loveth all" condemn a penitent sinner – and a man whose only sin was to kill a single bird without premeditation or hope of gain – to an eternity of torment and isolation?" (*English Romantic Irony* 142). Critics who attempt to answer this question, like Abrams, with evidence that the Mariner has returned to society and so has paid his penance, are brought to task again by Mellor. She argues that he has indeed returned to society, but to a society that hates and fears him. Mellor alludes to the reactions of the Wedding Guest upon first meeting the Mariner and also the Hermit and pilot's boy's fear. Also, while the Mariner has returned to land and to a sense of community, he is denied real human companionship in the form of marriage and friendship. Mellor cites the lines, "O sweeter than the marriage-feast, / Tis sweeter far to me, / To walk together to the kirk, / With a goodly company! -" (601-604) to show that the Mariner is forced to wander the land in search of people with whom to share his tale,

and this existence denies to him an ordinary life, although he has been returned to his home and community (Mellor 140-141). This is a very convincing argument for the ineffectuality of the Christian argument that the poem is a story about sin and penance.

Mellor, however, fails to mention the disparity between the actions of the crew and their eventual deaths. Irving Babbitt writes, for example, “the fact that it is impossible to extract any serious ethical purport from the *Ancient Mariner*...unless, indeed, one hold that it is fitting that, for having sympathized with the man who shot an albatross, ‘four times fifty living men’ should perish in torments unspeakable” (“Coleridge and Imagination” 119). It is difficult enough to imagine the Mariner being forced to roam the world and tell his story as retribution for his actions, but it is even more difficult to come to terms with the fact that two hundred seamen are killed for first praising then condemning the Mariner for his actions against the albatross. No, the punishment does not fit the crime, nor does it fit the conclusion of the poem that argues for praise for “the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (620-621). It seems that God “loveth all” except the crewmen whom He kills in order to teach the Mariner a lesson.

Four Times Fifty Living Men

There has been some analysis using queer theory on Romantic texts, but these have tended to shy away from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. One important point, to be later fleshed out in Chapter 2, is that the story takes place in a world rife with men with the exception of Life-in-Death, the only female character who is portrayed not as a typical female in the 17th century, but as a prostitute. The role of the female, or rather the lack of feminine presence, in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has been explored by Sarah Webster Goodwin in her essay "Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Frankenstein." She postulates that the female figure of Life-in-Death resembles a prostitute, and the marriage framework of the poem literally marginalizes the home and places the female as the antithesis to everything that the Mariner experiences in his journey. Thus, she is saying that the poem is haunted by a repressed sense of feminine domesticity (94). While I applaud Goodwin's exploration of the marginal role of women in the poem, she fails to explore the role of the feminized natural world in relation to the Mariner, and she also fails to investigate the homosocial⁵ world into which the Mariner is thrust. The gap in the current discussion is one that this thesis seeks to fill.

More exploration based on gender theory⁶ has been done with regard to Coleridge's two other lyrical ballads, "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel." Andrew Elfenbein courageously explores the lesbian implications in "Christabel" in his book *Romantic*

⁵ A term that refers to same-sex relationships, especially between men, that may not necessarily be homosexual in nature

⁶ Gender Theory is an approach to literary and cultural study that looks at the cultural and social constructions of masculinities and femininities and cultural study that rejects traditional categories.

Genius and looks at how Coleridge distances himself from pornographic male observations of lesbianism and elevates the relationship between Gertrude and Christabel to an almost sacred mystery. Elfenbein explains that prior to “Christabel,” poetry during this time period had treated sex between women as obscene and pornographic. Coleridge, however, he argues, seems to elevate feminine sexuality to the realm of artistry by having the women disrobe in front of each other without the traditional male voyeuristic presence, by not describing Geraldine’s body and leaving it instead as a mystery, and by making no clear distinction in Christabel and Geraldine between the dominator and the dominated. Mellor also argues the lesbian connection, saying, “Geraldine is mother, witch, lesbian, and even, in one account of how Coleridge meant to end the poem, Christabel’s beloved knight” (*English Romantic Irony* 159). I would argue that if Coleridge can write lesbian relations between women in “Christabel,” then the implications of isolation and redemption in a homosocial or homosexual context in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* should certainly be explored. Queer theory has become a crucial lens through which to view literature, but as yet, the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge has remained under the radar, so to speak.

This particular framework bridges a significant gap in the contemporary analysis of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and it also fits into recent literary developments. Using queer theory to analyze the poem will begin to introduce more concrete examples into the contemporary literary discussion. This essay will explore the moral inconsistencies in the poem, which have been unsatisfactorily settled both by major theoretical explorations of the poem and by autobiographical examinations.

Chapter 2: The Story

This chapter will look at the story within a story and will ignore the framework of the poem and the role of the Wedding-Guest, focusing instead on the Mariner's tale of his exploits upon the sea. The framework of the poem will be explored further in the following chapter, but the changing structure of the poem due to Coleridge's many revisions is a complex issue and one that deserves its own chapter. The 1798 version, Coleridge's original version of the poem, will be used as this is arguably closest to Coleridge's moral intention with the poem. The later versions will be analyzed in the subsequent chapter to show the effect of the changes and the framework of narrators upon the meaning of the poem as a whole.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner was first published in *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poetry, in 1798. William Wordsworth, Coleridge's close friend and editor of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in a letter to Cottle on June 24, 1799, wrote about Coleridge's poem, "From what I can gather it seems that the Ancyent Mariner has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on" (Mellor 142). He agreed to publish Coleridge's revised copy of the poem in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but he moved the poem to the back of the publication and asserted that the poem, "has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character...; secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon; thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated" (Owen 214-215). Even Wordsworth, Coleridge's literary mentor, took

issue with the poem, namely with the character of the Mariner, the imagery, and the events in the poem; in summation, he did not find the story and its moral believable.

Wordsworth was not the only critic to publicly express his trouble with the poem, but he was the first. Despite critical condemnation, Coleridge stood behind his conclusion.

Coleridge relates in *Table Talk* for May 31, 1830 that

Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired the Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in I, - it was improbable, and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that it might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant sitting down to eat dates by the side of a Well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! A geni starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant, *because* one of the date-shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the geni's son. (*Complete Works* 324)

Coleridge made many revisions to the poem, and these will be fleshed out further in the next chapter such as the addition of the Gloss to explain the “improbable” events in the plot, but he did not change a word of the moral conclusion of the poem, a conclusion that both Mrs. Barbauld and Wordsworth, among many others, had difficulty with. He chose not to change it because, as he told Mrs. Barbauld, the poem had “too much” of a moral. The problem with previous criticisms is that they fail to truly understand the moral in context. As explained in the previous chapter, if the poem is read as either religious allegory, personal autobiography, or Romantic text in isolation, the events in the poem “do not produce each other,” as Wordsworth has said. However, if the poem is read through the lens of queer theory, the events of the poem and the moral seem to make better sense.

Queer theory is an offshoot of gender theory that attempts to explore sexuality beyond the bounds of heterosexuality within a text. Queer theory began its life in mainstream scholarly studies in the 1990s. Unlike feminist studies, queer theory looks at the difference between gender and sex, and in so doing, looks at the actions and performance of people to determine identity. In addition, queer theory examines how those performances are constructed within the social arena and what, if any, beliefs about heteronormativity have played into the construction of gender. The Mariner's experience is interesting if read through this lens, because most of his journey takes place on the sea in a homosocial environment, or an environment peopled with male figures, one that is distinctly different and separate, both physically and mentally, from the heteronormative society on shore.

The homosocial, and sometimes homosexual, environment aboard ships in the eighteenth century has been clearly documented in Barry Burg's book *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*. Burg explores the hypocrisy between the rules of buggery and sodomy, used interchangeably at this time, and he documents instances of persecution of openly homosexual figures in the seventeenth century. He, on the other hand, also explains the presence of homosexuality on board seafaring ships at the time period, as these vessels were free from the traditional norms on land. Burg explains that the pirates in the Caribbean did not conform to societal norms because they were in a liminal space on board the ship,

where the essential features of their homosexual activity, exclusivity and the absence of constraints imposed by a more powerful and unsympathetic society, meant that buccaneer communities could evolve and mature with little or no interference from a dominant, restrictive, and sometimes hostile heterosexual nation. This opportunity to constitute and develop a community where homosexual

contact was the ordinary form of sexual expression was unusual enough, but to do it while free from persecution and opprobrium was unique, and although pirates did not indulge in conscious social experimentation, the all-male society they built and sustained in the West Indies for three-quarters of a century was a singular reflections of their peculiar situation. (Burg xl)

So, while British society openly condemned homosexuality or sodomy amongst the lower and middle classes, but surprisingly not the royalty, the sailors created their own rules and laws about buggery on board ship, laws that were free of persecution from the ruling parties on shore. This study shows not only that seafaring ships made up their own rules away from societal norms on shore but that homosexuality was an established practice in the seventeenth century. It cannot be argued that the Mariner exhibited any of these homosexual trends, but the liminal space free from societal norms is clearly seen, and this liminal space is clearly populated by only men in what can only be described as a homosocial environment.

He Shone Bright

The story within a story begins when the Mariner's ship leaves shore, and thus leaves the rules of men behind – he heads towards a liminal space on the sea where anything is possible, a liminal and homosocial space, like the one described in Burg's pirate tradition. However, because this is a poetic work and not a historical exploration, as Burg's work was, Coleridge explored the boundaries of liminality and homosociality within the framework of Romantic poetic custom, namely conforming to the gendering of the natural world. The first lines of the Mariner's story read:

The Ship was cheer'd, the Harbour clear'd –
Merrily did we drop
Below the Kirk, below the Hill,
Below the Light-house top.

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 (25-32).

Right away Coleridge gives the sun a gender – a masculine gender – by capitalizing “Sun” and telling the reader that “he” came out of the sea. This begins repeated references to the gendered natural world. Coleridge again repeats the lines about the sun at the start of the second part of the poem changing the word “left” to “right” to show that the seamen have gotten turned around. However, he again refers to the sun as masculine saying, “The Sun came up upon the right, / Out of the sea came he;” (81-82). The storm-blast, or the Spirit, is also gendered as male. “Nine fathom deep he had follow'd us” (129), asserts Coleridge. Anne Williams, in her essay “An I for an Eye: Spectral Persecution in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” takes this gendered viewpoint a step further, looking at the fatherly roles the two masculine natural elements play. She argues

that the sun is first seen as a comforting father, but the storm blast who is “also male, is experienced as an abusive father.” Williams goes on to cite that the storm blast, “Was tyrannous and strong: / He struck with his o’ertaking wings, / And chased us south along” (42-44) to show the disparity between the passive male sun rising and setting with the violent masculine storm-blast, an analysis that adds a paternal, if judgmental, atmosphere to the poem. While the sun and storm-blast are male, the moon is referred to as feminine.

The Mariner notices the moon when he is alone in the sea and wants to die. He remarks, “The moving Moon went up the sky / And no where did abide: / Softly she was going up / And a star or two beside -“ (265-268), capitalizing “Moon” as he did “Sun” previously to personify them and to highlight their importance to the underlying gendered natural world. Whalley postulates that the main events of the story can be sorted out by the kinds of light in which they occur and fleshes out the contrasting roles of the moon and the sun in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but I agree with Williams in her disagreement with Whalley that the men of the sun represent “One Life” and reason and the men of the moon represent Imagination (Whalley 40, Williams 1117). Like Williams, I see the roles of the sun and moon as simpler, although I disagree with her about their function. They represent to me a natural world that has both male and female figures fighting for dominance over the sky, but the Mariner is stuck on the sea in a liminal space between the sun and the moon - between male and female.

The Albatross About My Neck Was Hung

In fact, the Mariner is identified with neither male nor female, but rather the Albatross, which is a gender-neutral object. The Albatross is referred to as “It.” When the Mariner first sees the bird he notices, “Thorough the Fog it came; / And an it were a Christian Soul, / We hail’d it in God’s name” (62-64). It is interesting that the Mariner is saddled with the corpse of the bird, an ungendered object, in a clearly male/female divided natural world. The sun and the storm blast are masculine, and the moon is clearly feminine, yet the bird is an “it,” a thing without gender. By having it placed around his neck, the Mariner makes visible his confusion about his identity and his indecision with choosing a gender through a physical symbol.

It is clear that the Mariner is aligning himself with the Albatross, because for the first time in the story, he has taken ownership of his actions by using the pronoun “I.” The Mariner tells the Wedding Guest, “With my cross bow / I shot the Albatross” (79-80). Prior to this moment in the story, the language has been very submissive and has been characterized by the Mariner’s passive voice and intransitive verbs (Williams 1117). The lines, “The ship was cheer’d, the Harbour clear’d / Mairily did we drop” (25-26) and “it grew wond’rous cauld:” (50) show that by and large the Mariner, as Wordsworth has claimed, does not act but is rather acted upon. In addition, the Mariner’s story prior to the killing of the Albatross uses the first person plural “we,” again diminishing the actions of the Mariner. However, with the appearance of the Albatross, the Mariner uses “I” for the first time, thus taking ownership of his action, and in so doing, aligning himself with the nongendered bird, even though that action is a murder. The 1817 edition of the poem greatly lessens this momentous use of the “I” by capitalizing the word

“ALBATROSS” (82). This places the emphasis on the bird rather than on the Mariner’s association with the bird, altering the meaning of the text slightly. However, that modification doesn’t change the fact that for the first time the Mariner has used the word “I” in his story, and it is in relation to the bird – the nongendered bird – in order to show that the bird has personal significance to him.

Some may argue that the Mariner does not choose the gender-neutral object. In fact, one of Wordsworth’s criticisms after the publication in 1798 was that the Mariner “does not act, but is continually acted upon.” It is true that the Mariner does not know why he shoots the Albatross, but it is exactly because he seems to act unconsciously that he should be identified with the Albatross, the bird that has no gender. Freud explains that the ego represents consciousness, or perception. He also explains that the id represents the subconscious, or instinct. The Mariner seems to shoot the Albatross instinctually, or with his id, the text reading only, “with my cross bow / I shot the Albatross” (79-80). Since the id represents the unconscious area of the brain, it also houses the sensations, both positive and negative, and these sensations may remain buried due to the ego’s repression. The fact that the Mariner cannot explain why he shoots the Albatross indicates that the reasons lie deep within the id, or the subconscious, and have been repressed by the ego.

It is true, however, that after the Mariner shoots the Albatross, the language changes back to passive voice reading, “Instead of the Cross the Albatross / About my neck was hung” (137-138). Continuing on with Freud’s theory, perhaps the Mariner does not understand yet why he has shot the Albatross, and so does not immediately identify with the androgynous bird. Instead, he passively stands by as the bird is hung around his

neck. In having that happen, the Mariner is identified with the nongendered object of the natural world; at this point is he unable to decide whether he is attracted to the female or male, and thus whether he identifies himself with the male or female. The Mariner cannot elucidate why he shoots the Albatross, but his action forces him to wander alone and lonely throughout the world as one by one his shipmates perish. This situation of the Mariner where he suffers an emotional burden for an unconscious action is analogous with Freud's definition of the struggle between the ego and the id. Freud writes, "When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia" (Freud 19). The Albatross, being of neutral gender, represents the relinquishing of a sexual object. The Mariner is then subject to melancholia, which is represented in the poem as his physical and mental isolation in the sea. McDonald seems to explain the Mariner's predicament perfectly in terms of Freud's ego and id. McDonald believes that,

The Mariner can cite no rational motive for shooting the albatross. The crime derives from the primitive elements within himself – from a "rotting sea" of primeval instinct, subliminal passion, and repressed emotion. It arises from an animal impulse which thereafter is associated with coiling water snakes...One remembers that the Mariner's salvation comes with his blessing the reeling water snakes, With his acceptance of his own mysterious nature and all its sinister sexual, and animal associations. (545)

Thus, the Mariner seems to shoot the bird for no conscious reason, but yet it is hung about his neck. Because he can't explain why he shoots it, the Albatross is hung about his neck as a sign of his subconscious desires. The Albatross only falls off his neck when he blesses the water snakes, a definitive phallic symbol, thus bringing his subconscious to

his consciousness and acknowledging his sexual identification with the symbol of masculine virility.

Influential feminist readings have indicated Coleridge's masculinism, but the case is much more complex. In an often-cited study, for instance, Anne Mellor posits nature as feminine, especially in the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge's close friend and advisor. This is done, argues Mellor citing the river Alph in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," in order to show man's dominance over the feminine. This is exacerbated by the poet's voice, his masculine voice, telling the story and thus subverting the feminine voice. Mellor also argues that sometimes poets, particularly Coleridge, "subtly regender both the subject and the object as male and in the process erase the female from discourse: she does not speak; she therefore has no existence" (*Romanticism and Gender* 19). Last, Mellor argues that the six male Romantic poets, including Coleridge, tended to narcissistically idolize the female as mirrors of themselves (26). Even though Mellor specifically mentions Coleridge as one of the six poets to whom these gendered theories apply, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* falls short of all of these gendered Romantic norms.

First, Mellor argues that Romantic poets tend to gender nature as female in order to show, both through man's journey through nature and through the male retelling of the story, man's dominance over the female. This, however, does not ring true for the Mariner's tale. Coleridge makes nature both masculine and feminine – the sun and storm blast are masculine while the moon is feminine. The Mariner does not want to subdue the natural world because he does not want to portray sexual domination over women. In fact, he is subject to the whims and fancies of nature – the lack of wind, the beating sun, and so on. The Mariner seems to be torn between men and women and, in fact, he

identifies himself with the nongendered Albatross of the natural world. Williams, as stated earlier in this chapter, sees the natural world as dually gendered in terms of paternal and maternal forces trying to both help and hinder the Mariner's progress, but it is important to note that the Mariner does not choose either the paternal or maternal force, but rather the gender neutral object.

That Woman and her Mate

Second, Mellor argues that sometimes Romantic poets regender the subject and the object in literature in order to “erase the female from discourse” (19); however, looking at the figure of Life-in-Death, one can clearly see that Coleridge does not attempt to erase the female from discourse, but like the gendered natural world, sets up a gender binary in order to show the Mariner’s disassociation with either gender. This binary, like the division of the sun and moon, is again seen in the appearance of Death and Life-in-Death. The appearance of Life-in-Death is rather interesting, because Coleridge significantly changes the passages related to Life-in-Death in the 1817 edition of the text. The 1798 version has the Mariner noticing a ship approaching and uttering the lines, “And are these two all, all the crew / That woman and her Mate?” (183-184). This places the woman, Life-in-Death, in the central dominating position, while the male, Death, is her mate. In the 1700s women were traditionally seen as the property of men and thus in somewhat subservient roles, but Coleridge interestingly chooses to switch the roles, and this is interesting garnered from the first two lines about the deathly figures. The 1817 version is slightly different, reading, “Is that a DEATH? and are there two? / Is DEATH that woman’s mate?” (188-189). The capitalization of death makes that masculine figure the central figure in the discourse. Additionally, the question mark after the line, “Is DEATH that woman’s mate?” has the effect of diminishing the authorial proclamation of placing the woman figure in the central role. It is as if in the later version Coleridge is playing more into the traditional gender roles of British society. He does this again a few lines later when he writes, “The Woman and a fleshless Man / Therein sate merrily” (189-190), placing the woman first. Interestingly, these lines are eliminated from the

1817 version, perhaps again, because it has the woman in the more dominant role.

Essentially, the revision makes the poem more conservative.

Although Coleridge changed quite a few lines in this section of the poem, the description of the deathly figures, particularly Life-in-Death, is still gruesome and interesting, given the time in which it was written. The poem describes Life-in-Death as a woman whose “lips are red, *her* looks are free, / *Her* locks are yellow as gold: / Her skin is as white as leprosy, / And she is far liker Death than he; / Her flesh makes the still air cold” (196-200). Coleridge himself italicizes many of the “*her*”s, as he does the word “*his*” when describing Death, perhaps to again set up that gendered binary between the two figures. However, Life-in-Death seems to have more power in this relationship, because she is “far liker Death than he.” In essence, being alive but feeling dead and alone is more fearful than dying, according to the Mariner. Thus, she has the most power in the situation, not only because she is mentioned first, but because the fate she offers is more horrifying than death’s. She, according to the Mariner, “makes the still air cold,” arguably, because she terrifies the Mariner more than Death.

Interestingly, the setting of the sun outlined by the boat accentuates this gender division. The boat on which Death and Life-in-Death appear is gendered feminine. Although the 1817 version of the text appears more conservative, it offers an important connection between the setting and female Life-in-Death by saying, “Like vessel, like crew!” The “vessel” is described as feminine.

Are those *her* sails that glance in the Sun,
Like restless gossamers?

Are those *her* naked ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate? (183-186).

It is interesting to note that the Sun, which has already been established as a male-gendered natural object, is peering through the grate of the feminine ship. The 1798 version says that the sun is peering through “the bars of a dungeon grate?” (182), which again makes the male seem less powerful than the female Life-in-Death. The male sun is imprisoned behind the ribs of the feminine vessel just as the male figure of Death is stuck behind the dominant and authoritative female Life-in-Death.

Life-in-Death’s looks are interesting for the time period in which the poem was written, a time period in which women were often seen as angels of the domestic sphere, yet Coleridge places the female figure of Life-in-Death outside of the home and in the dominant position. There has been much debate over why he chooses to do this, but most critics agree that Coleridge paints the female figure as a prostitute. Elfenbein, in his examination of the lesbianism present in Coleridge’s other work, *Christabel*, has examined the lyrical ballads of Coleridge for evidence of the “sex panic” of the 1790s. He explains that at this time there was an escalation of prostitutes, and “Coleridge’s poetry of the 1790s responds vividly to this sex panic” (187). This can easily be seen in Coleridge’s portrayal of Life-in-Death as a prostitute, a temptress, and one who has power over men.

Goodwin, in the process of exploring the marginalized female roles and domestic kitsch in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Frankenstein*, explains that Life-in-Death is “a harlot,” a “deformed mother” figure, the “Whore of Babylon” and “the object of desire distorted by the poet’s guilt and rage” (95). Goodwin explains that the woman seems to have the traditional look of the prostitutes in London in the 1790s, citing her red lips, free looks, gold hair, and the deathly white skin that signals the woman as a bringer of death

and disease. However, Goodwin also analyzes the line “her looks were free” in more detail, explaining that Coleridge is “talking about sexual freedom, but with a price tag” (95). She also points out that “Life-in-Death is pointedly a fallen woman, and one with considerable demonic power. Her locks are as yellow as the gold that buys her sexual favors: she represents the commodification of desire” (96). It is interesting that the only physical female figure in the poem, aside from the moon in the natural world and the vessel that is symbolic of Life-in-Death, seems to be a prostitute, but she can’t represent the “commodification of desire,” as the Mariner feels no desire for her. Coleridge perhaps introduces the wild woman as an expression of the sexual panic of the 1790s, as Elfenbein has stated, but it is important to note that the Mariner feels nothing for the woman, perhaps showing that he, again, does not identify with either gender nor does he subscribe to the traditional desires of society.

There is, in essence, a triangle present: the female Life-in-Death, the masculine figure of Death, and the Mariner. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* introduced groundbreaking theories about the archetypal love triangle, postulating that the bonds of rivalry are closely linked to the bonds of love (21). She cites Girard who bases his argument on Freud’s Oedipal desire: “The bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being stronger, even more heavily determinant of action and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved” (21). The triangle is clearly present in the scene in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* where Death and Life-in-Death are battling for the Mariner’s passive soul as he closely watches their game. The Mariner should, if following the archetypal triangle pattern, either identify with the male or the female in the story, but he

identifies with neither. He has yet to make an association with either gender, but instead stands there passively watching with the Albatross, his symbol of nongendered identification, around his neck.

Coleridge has introduced another gender binary into the story, and again one in which the Mariner is conspicuously absent. Death and Life-in-Death play a dice game to win the Mariner's soul, and the female figure Life-in-Death wins. In an unfeminine like display of sportsmanship she cheers, "The Game is done! I've won, I've won!" (203). The fact that the female figure wins the dice game places her in the dominant role. This position represents "most excessively the lack – or castration – embodied in the death figure" (Goodwin 97). Death has no power in this scene. He cannot simply take the Mariner's life, but he must play a game with Life-in-Death in order to win the Mariner's soul. Because he must play, he shows a sort of impotence (Goodwin) in that he has no authority, either over the situation, the Mariner's soul, or even of the female figure. Coleridge portrays the male in this scene as a castrated figure and the female as a powerful prostitute in order to truly show that the Mariner inhabits a liminal space in the sea – a space that does not at all compare to the traditional values on shore. Like the gendered natural world, the Mariner does not fit into the binary of the deathly figures either; he has no control over his life and no control over the natural world until he makes a decision and aligns himself, however inadvertently, with one of the genders.

And I Bless'd Them Unaware

The Mariner, through his praise of the water snakes, begins to accept his true identity, as he could never accept the Albatross when it first came to him. The Mariner admits that “A spring of love gushes from my heart, / And I blessed [the water snakes] unaware!” (288-290). As soon as he praises the snakes, “The Albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea” (294-295). It is only when the Mariner identifies with the phallus⁷ or that he praises it in others that he is released from his bonds. The Mariner accepts his admiration for the beauty of the snakes, again a symbol of male virility, that he is able to understand his true self-identity, potentially a homosexual identity. However, that identity is never manifested, because the Mariner remains alone the rest of his life, relegated to traveling the world looking for people to whom to tell his story.

The praising of the sea snakes towards the end of the poem allows the Mariner to absolve himself of his own self-revulsion, because previously midway through the poem he had identified himself with the snakes, saying, “The many men, so beautiful! / And they all dead did lie: / And a thousand thousand slimy things / Live’ on - and so did I” (240-241). In his heart he objects to the fact that the slimy sea creatures should live while the beautiful men have died. By equating himself with the snakes (“and so did I”) originally the Mariner laments that fact that he, too, is still alive. Unfortunately, in his opinion, he is as low and unworthy as the slimy sea creatures, and even death is too good for him: “And yet I could not die” (264). By using the word “slimy” we can truly see the Mariner’s revulsion for the sea creatures and their vitality, and in turn, for himself who also continues to live. The act of praising the sea snakes later is so momentous because

⁷ Lacan differentiates between the penis and the phallus – the phallus represents desire and gender while the penis represents the physical and sex.

not only has he begun to love the most base of all sexual desires, the phallic symbol of the penis, but he has begun to love himself, thus absolving himself of the self-revulsion and guilt he has felt since killing the Albatross.

Although the Albatross falls off the Mariner's neck and he appears to be absolved of his sin through his association with the masculine, he remains alone in the homosocial⁸ microcosm of the ship. The sexual binary that has existed in the story up until the point has been erased with the praising of the snakes, and the Mariner is again placed into a homosocial situation – on a ship with only male figures, but he again feels isolated from humanity. The Mariner, it is true, has been in such a situation since embarking on the journey on the ship, but at first he feels camaraderie with the other shipmates.; the use of the pronoun “we” indicates this. Immediately after shooting the Albatross (“I shot the Albatross”), at the end of Part I, however, the Mariner begins to be alienated by the other men. The Mariner is first condemned then praised for shooting the Albatross by the seamen on board the ship. This vacillation exacerbates the singularity of the Mariner and highlights the fact that he is placed in opposition to the other men on the ship. Although all begin to suffer from lack of thirst, it is the Mariner to whom Death and Life-in-Death focus their attention, and after Life-in-Death wins the Mariner's soul, the other men “curs'd [him] with his ee.” (217) and drop down dead one by one, finally leaving the Mariner physically alone as he had been emotionally alone since shooting the Albatross.

⁸ The term *homosocial* refers to relationships between men, not necessarily of a homosexual nature. The ship, and in fact primarily the whole narrative, is characterized by male presence, and apart from the castrating figure of Life-in-Death and the moon, there are no other feminine presences in the story. Thus, the Mariner's loneliness is exacerbated by the homosocial situation.

The Mariner then remains physically alone on the ship for seven days and seven nights, but after he praises the water snakes, the seamen rise up to help the Mariner row to shore, but they will not look at him nor speak to him. Although the Mariner tries to identify himself with the other seamen, the male seamen, as in “We were a ghastly crew” (342), they seem to ignore him and make him still feel alone. “The body of my brother’s son / Stood by me knee to knee: / The body and I pull’d at one rope, / But he said nought to me - ” (343-346). In addition, the men do not look at him, “But look at me they n’old: / Thought I, I am as thin as air - / They cannot me behold” (385-387). It is feasible that they cannot look at him nor hear him because they are spirits of the dead and thus have no substance, but that does not diminish the fact that the Mariner still feels alone. This loneliness begins after the shooting of the Albatross, and it remains, both in emotional and physical form, throughout the rest of the Mariner’s voyage, highlighting that he does not fit into society, neither the homosocial environment on the ship nor the society on shore to which he returns.

Alone on the Wide, Wide Sea

This feeling of loneliness does not change even when he reaches shore, for the Hermit and the Pilot's boy do not really see him for who he truly is and instead think that he is a ghost. The Mariner moves his lips, "the Pilot shriek'd / And fell down in a fit. / The Holy Hermit rais'd his eyes / And pray'd where he did sit" (607-610). In addition, the Hermit asks the Mariner "What manner man art thou?" (624) because he doesn't believe the Mariner is alive. Thus, even though the Mariner returns to his home and his country, his travels up on the sea have made him unfit to return to normal society – he feels alone still among men because he is not like them. As he explains to the Wedding Guest, he is a soul that "hath been / Alone on a wide wide sea:" (644-645). He is resigned to roam the land telling his tale, knowing that he will forever be alone because, although he has identified himself with the masculine phallic, he will be unable to find an other, at least one that is acceptable to societal heteronormative beliefs.

Although the Mariner has returned home, he has completed his circular journey, but he still feels as if he doesn't belong. Abrams explains the circuitous journey present in most Romantic literature in his book *Natural Supernaturalism*. He explains this journey as symbolic of Adam's fall from grace by saying,

The poet or philosopher, as the avant garde of the general human consciousness, possesses the vision of an imminent culmination of history which will be equivalent to a recovered paradise or golden age. The movement toward this goal is a circuitous journey and quest, ending in the attainment of self-knowledge, wisdom and power. This educational process is a fall from primal unity into self-division, self-contradiction, and self-conflict, but the fall is in turn regarded as an indispensable first step along the way toward a higher unity which will justify the sufferings undergone en route. The dynamic of the process is the tension toward closure of the divisions, contraries, or contradictions themselves. The beginning and end of the journey is man's ancestral home, which is often linked with a female contrary from whom he has, upon setting out, been

disparted. The goal of this long inner quest is to be reached by a gradual ascent, or else by a sudden breakthrough of imagination or cognition; in either case, however, the achievement of the goal is pictured as a scene of recognition and reconciliation, and is often signalized by a loving union with the feminine other, upon which man finds himself thoroughly at home with himself, his milieu, and his family of fellow men. (255)

Unlike other Romantic literature of the time period, Coleridge's poem does not end in a happy reconciliation with a feminine other, and the Mariner is not at home with "himself, his milieu, and his family of fellow men," but is instead forced to wander the world alone, telling his tale to strangers. The feminine other, in this situation, is conspicuously absent. The framework of the story, the marriage, accentuates this absence.

In addition, Coleridge, in his *Collected Letters*, explains that he believes in the circuitous journey in literature. He writes in a letter to Joseph Cottle, "The common end of all narrative, nay of all poems is to convert a series into a whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a straight line, assume for our understandings a circular motion- the snake with it's [sic] Tail in it's [sic] Mouth" (545). Although Coleridge seems to believe that the circuitous journey is necessary in literature, he does not subscribe to it in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. He seems to attempt to, however. When the Mariner leaves on his journey, he leaves "Below the Kirk, below the Hill, / Below the Light-house top" (27-28), and when he returns he views the three in reverse order, saying, "is this indeed / The light-house top I see? / Is this the Hill? Is this the Kirk? / Is this mine own countree?" (479-482). This is a fitting end to the story within the story on the sea – he has left and has returned, the journey coming full circle. Yet, still, the feminine other, the feeling of home, and the unity with fellow men is missing. Coleridge has completed the circular journey of the story within a story of the

Mariner's trip at sea, and were he to end it there, perhaps the public would have better received the lyrical ballad. Instead, Coleridge attempted to end the poem with a moral conclusion one that, as was elucidated in the beginning of this chapter, appeared to not successfully answer the questions introduced in the poem itself.

It is important to remember that the entire story within a story of the Mariner's journey at sea has been one in which the Mariner has been the outcast. In a liminal space rife with gender binaries, the Mariner chooses to identify himself with the androgyny, or the Albatross. He eventually identifies himself with the phallic symbol of the water snakes, and thus the masculine, but he is still excluded by the ghostly seamen as a punishment for shooting the Albatross and identifying himself with a symbol of androgyny. In shooting the bird, the Mariner fails to identify himself as either of the gender binaries, and thus segregates himself from the other men on the ship who have chosen either heterosexuality or buggery, as Burg wrote in his exploration of pirates and sodomy.

Not only is the Mariner isolated on the ship from the seamen because of his failure to choose, but after he has chosen the water snakes by blessing them, and thus revealed his homosexual partiality, he returns to shore where the definitions of gender and expectations of sexuality are clearly defined and in opposition to the fluid and vascillating gendered norms on the sea. Thus, even when he returns, he is not accepted by the Pilot's boy and the Hermit, and is forced to wander the world alone forever telling his story with a feminine other conspicuously absent. However, perhaps the moral of the story is that the Mariner does not need a feminine other, nor a masculine one, because he knows who he really is, and he feels that God has truly accepted him for who he really is.

The poetic closure of the poem is in essence a true moral conclusion. The last two stanzas of the poem, again, read:

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all (616-621).

The whole journey of the Mariner can be seen as his struggle to accept himself and his true identity, potentially a homosexual identity. He must fight against society by both loving and being repulsed by the bodies of the seamen. He must wear the Albatross, the symbol of non-gender or androgyny, around his neck as his own personal burden. It is only at the end of the poem that the Mariner comes to terms with himself, and his final understanding is that of Christian love. He learns that he must love and accept everybody “Both man and bird and beast”; himself, his true self, and his flesh. The moral contradiction that critics bring up between the conclusion of the poem and the body of the poem is actually not contradictory at all but reminiscent of the Mariner’s struggle for self-acceptance. This interpretation allows the moral contradictions to be embraced, rather than ignored or censured for being an encumbrance to the text.

It has been mentioned a few times in this chapter that the Mariner’s identification with the phallic water snakes and his failure to identify with the gendered binaries might hint at a homosexual identify. This thesis is not stating that the Mariner is gay – this would be too hard to prove given that the Mariner never acts upon any feelings he may have towards men. Also, the Mariner remains alone for the rest of his life, traveling the world and telling his tale. The Mariner may or may not be homosexual – the uncovering

of that symbolism is not the goal of this thesis. Rather, it is my attempt to point out that the Mariner is truly “alone on a wide sea,” and he only comes to accept himself and his situation after he identifies himself with the masculine. This explanation seems to answer questions both about the supernatural elements in the poem and about the moral conclusion of the poem.

It is important to remember, however, that this moral poetic closure does not end the poem, as it maybe should. Rather, the poem ends with the Wedding Guest turning away from the wedding and leaving a “sadder and wiser man” (671). The wedding, a symbol of heterosexual union, frames the Mariner’s story within a story and the poem as a whole. The next chapter will look at the structure of the poem, including the multiple narrative voices and the relationship of the Mariner and the Wedding Guest in order to use the format of the poem as additional evidence of the merits of using queer theory to explain the poem.

Chapter 3: The Structure

Like the Wedding Guest who “cannot chuse but hear” (22), the reader likewise gets caught up in the story the Mariner has to tell, ignoring the framework of the poem as a whole. While the Mariner’s story dominates the poem, the structure of the poem itself is actually very multifaceted. With four separate voices, the poem offers many levels of complexity, each narrative strand bearing a distinctive character and each comprising a different agenda. Both Dyck and McGann acknowledge four separate voices: the first is the Gloss that was added in 1800 edition of the poem, the second is the Mariner’s tale as told by the Mariner himself, the third is the Wedding Guest who interrupts the Mariner’s tale, and the fourth is the narrator himself who comments upon the Mariner and Wedding Guest, offering context for the telling of the Mariner’s story. These voices cannot be ignored in favor of merely the Mariner’s story, which makes up the bulk of the poem, for together they make up the poem and offer insight into the meaning and purpose of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. These four voices not only document the changes that Coleridge made to the poem over almost twenty years, but the Wedding Guest’s and the narrator’s voices also take focus away from the Mariner’s story, instead pointing out the framework of the wedding and calling question to the Mariner’s choice of the Wedding Guest. These voices in conjunction serve to deflect the Mariner’s story and invite the reader to contemplate the structure and its function on the poem as a whole.

My Ghastly Adventure

The Mariner's story has already been analyzed in the previous chapter for hints as to the meaning of the conclusion within the context of the poem, but it will be reexamined briefly here as one of the four voices within the lyrical ballad. The voice here is, obviously, that of the character of the Mariner telling the story of his travels to the unsuspecting Wedding Guest. It is important to remember that this story is actually a flashback and the Mariner has told this story numerous times before. Owen explains that although the world of the sea at first "has the freshness and wonder of the never-before-traveled, the never-before-seen...by the time the Wedding Guest hears the tale it has lived through many retellings" (264-265). He has been traveling for many years and across many strange lands telling his tale. As he explains to the Wedding Guest,

Since then at an uncertain hour,
Now oftimes and now fewer,
That anguish comes and makes me tell
My ghastly aventure.

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange powers of speech;
The moment that his face I see
I know the man that must hear me;
To him my tale I teach (629-637).

The Mariner has told his tale multiple times, and will continue to tell his tale many more as part of his "penance" (423), according to the Polar Spirit. Thus, although the Mariner tells his story as if he is feeling the wonder, horror, and awe for the first time, "what we experience through the explanation is the suffering and the conversion, the attempt to understand, and the mystery as life touches value and meaning in the universe and helps to create them" (Owen 265). The Mariner's story provides the moral to the poem in its entirety, although the moral has been hotly debated for centuries.

He Cannot Chuse but Hear

While the Mariner's story provides the moral, the dialogue between the Mariner and the Wedding Guest is actually the primary objective of the ballad. The constant interruptions that the Wedding Guest makes as the Mariner tells his story serve to remind the reader that the Wedding Guest is still there and is in fact the true listener of the tale – the reader is merely the accidental voyeur of the meeting between the Mariner and Wedding Guest. The Wedding Guest interjects the Mariner's story four times – or five if one looks at the original 1798 version: twice at the beginning of the Mariner's story in addition to beating his breast, once because of the Mariner's horrific expression as he relates his shooting of the Albatross, once when the Mariner is relating how the seamen dropped dead because the Wedding Guest is afraid the Mariner is a ghost, and once in the 1798 but not the 1817 version when the seamen's bodies help the Mariner sail the ship but they cannot seem to see him. Additionally, the Mariner interrupts his tale, at least in the 1798 version, to address the Wedding Guest saying, "(Listen, O Stranger! to me)" (215) to again reinforce the Wedding Guest's presence in the ballad. It is important to note that although the Wedding Guest is speechless at the end of the Mariner's narrative, his presence is duly noted and the sounds of the wedding bring both the reader and the Wedding Guest out of the Mariner's hypnotic recitation. Therefore, the Wedding Guest's presence frames the ballad, and his constant interruptions of the Mariner's tale reinforce his presence, highlighting that the relationship between the Wedding Guest and the Mariner is the essential framework of the poem.

In addition, the Wedding Guest is always seen in conjunction with the Mariner. As Pafford explains, "The Wedding Guest is to be seen and understood always in relation

to the Mariner, the great protagonist in the action” (619). Most of the time the Wedding Guest speaks, the Mariner silences him with words of comfort, such as “Fear not, fear not, thou wedding guest!” (232). The Mariner does not respond to the Wedding Guest at the end of Part I where the Mariner retells his shooting of the Albatross; he doesn’t interact with the Wedding Guest here because the story he will tell is in itself explanation of the effects of his action. The Mariner’s voice would not even be heard without the Wedding Guest’s presence, as it is to him he tells his tale after stopping “one of three” (2).

However, as Mellor questions, “Why does the Mariner stop only one guest? Why not all three? And how can he hold a grown man eager to attend his closes kinsman’s wedding with only one bright eye?” (*English Romantic Irony* 138). The Mariner himself explains why he stops only one man, but he does not elucidate a reason. He tells the Wedding Guest, “The moment that his face I see / I know the man that must hear me; / To him my tale I teach” (635-637). Although this is an explanation, it confused critics for centuries. How does the Mariner know the man to whom he must tell his tale? What is it about the man’s face or demeanor that alerts the Mariner of his confessor? The answer is simple – the Mariner must find someone who will empathize with him and understand his personal struggle. Perhaps he sees in the Wedding Guest a little of his own personal struggle for identity or for belonging in a society rife with rules and norms about gender, sexuality, and morality and wants to share with him his hard-earned belief that despite personal proclivities, “the dear God...made and loveth all” (663-664).

As stated in the previous chapter, the Mariner, and the Wedding Guest, may or may not be homosexual, but ascertaining that is not the purpose of this paper. The

Mariner remains alone and lonely for the rest of his life, traveling the world and telling his tale; thus it is impossible to prove that he has homosexual tendencies. In fact, the Mariner's explanation to the Wedding Guest is followed shortly by the explanation that the Mariner's "soul hath been / Alone on a wide wide sea:" (644-645). This essay is merely defending the belief that the Mariner's journey is an allegory for self-discovery and, after he finds it, he feels a compulsion to tell certain people who he chooses by demeanor, like the Wedding Guest, about his personal enlightenment, which may or may not be of a homosexual nature. The Mariner appears to feel alone in society, whether against the backdrop of a wedding or on a ship with seamen, and it is only after he accepts himself through the blessing of the phallic water snakes that he has a purpose and he comes to terms with himself and his situation.

It is noteworthy that at the beginning of the poem the Wedding Guest is on his way to a wedding, and as the Mariner stops him, he continues to try to eagerly get away from the Mariner and his story to return to the revelry of the wedding reception. Yet, at the end of the Mariner's story, the Wedding Guest turns away "from the bridegroom's door" (668). What, then, does the Wedding Guest learn during the Mariner's story that makes him turn away both physically and mentally from the traditional ceremony? Perhaps, the Wedding Guest sees in himself signs of the Mariner's struggle for identity. Freud, in his analysis of the conscious and the unconscious, postulates that "we have two kinds of unconscious – the one which is latent but capable of becoming conscious, and the one which is repressed and which is not, in itself and without more ado, capable of becoming conscious" (Freud 5). It could be this realization of his true homosexual identity and the unconscious becoming conscious as a result of the Mariner's story that

makes the Wedding Guest turn away from the traditional symbol of heterosexual love, the wedding, and go “like one that hath been stunned, / And is of a sense forlorn: / A sadder and wiser man” (669-671).

Sarah Dyck, noticing the change in the Wedding Guest, writes, “A profound change has come over the Wedding Guest. He is no longer the impatient, rude, quick tempered young man who said: ‘Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!’ In fact, he has nothing to say; he is speechless. The merry noise of the wedding-feast no longer commands his interest” (Dyck 594-595). The wedding, which the Wedding Guest has mentioned three times and the noise of which interrupts the Mariner four times, no longer interests the Wedding Guest, and he leaves without attending the nuptial feast. Pafford explains this strange phenomenon, saying, “Particularly at the beginning of the poem, [the Mariner and the Wedding Guest] appear to be violently hostile, irreconcilable by nature. As the action progresses, moving them from the natural world to the supernatural and back, and sometimes hovering in between, there is a corresponding shift in the relationship between the two culminating in an impressive likeness in spirit and interest at the close” (Pafford 619). They appear unlike in the beginning, but it is important to remember that the Mariner chooses the Wedding Guest for a reason, and at the end of the narrative the Wedding Guest finally understands the reason as well. This inexplicable choice by the Mariner and change of the Wedding Guest makes sense in this light.

The Wedding Guest also continues to listen to the Mariner’s story, despite the interrupting noises of the wedding. The Wedding Guest “cannot chuse but hear” (22), and it has been often assumed that he must listen to the Mariner because he is hypnotized by the Mariner’s “glittering eye” (17). Yes, this might be the reason the Wedding Guest

first listens to the Mariner, but the line “he cannot chuse but hear” is repeated five stanzas later after the Mariner has begun his tale. Thus, the Wedding Guest’s attention to the story might begin because of the Mariner’s hypnotic gaze, but perhaps it is in part also because the Wedding Guest identifies with the Mariner and his struggle, or at least is interested to hear more about it. Perhaps he cannot choose but listen because, like the Mariner who cannot choose but tell his story, they are both somehow drawn to each other and to something they recognize in each other, perhaps an identity fraught with conflict and indecision.

It is true that the Mariner first garners the Wedding Guest’s attention through a look, through his “glittering eye.” Williams suggests that the Wedding Guest leaves sadder and wiser, “realizing new, though unspeakable and unspoken, dimensions of reality” and the Mariner’s glittering eye “implies the Lacanian phallic gaze of simultaneous identity and alienation” (1116). She is saying that the Mariner seems to see in the Wedding Guest some projection of his own ego or inner consciousness. Lacan, in his postulation about the mirror stage of an infant’s development, believes that when a child looks in a mirror it recognizes its ideal self, and the ego is created at that moment. The infant recognizes the image of himself, but as something stronger than his own self as subject. Lacan believes this happens before the child learns language and can objectify the image through arbitrary language, or with “the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject” (72). This theory seems to apply well to the relationship between the Mariner and the Wedding Guest.

The Mariner's hypnotic gaze identifies him as the child, while the Wedding Guest is the image the Mariner is focused on. The Mariner holds the Wedding Guest with "his glittering eye - / The wedding guest stood still / And listens like a three year's child; / The Marinere hath his will" (17-20). It is interesting that the Wedding Guest is likened to a three-year old child, especially in view of Lacan's theory. The Wedding Guest is hypnotized by the Mariner's gaze and at that moment has no will of his own; his will becomes controlled by the Mariner, and the Wedding Guest "cannot chuse but hear." Thus, the Wedding Guest becomes a projection of the Mariner's ego. The Mariner's story, and his hypnotic gaze, makes the Wedding Guest a mirror image of the Mariner and reflects the Mariner's conscious self that has discovered belief and meaning through his allegorical journey onto the Wedding Guest. The Mariner projects his beliefs about self onto the Wedding Guest, and as a result, the Wedding Guest leaves at the end of the Mariner's narrative a "sadder and wiser man" because he has seen a little of the Mariner's struggle inside himself.

Also like the Mariner, the Wedding Guest is prone to passivity during the story. The Wedding Guest as listener is "reduced to nearly complete passiveness; his very occasional responses hereafter to the Mariner's long recital amount to largely ineffectual spasms of protest until they cease altogether. He becomes one indeed who, in Wordsworth's phrase mistakenly objecting to Coleridge's characterization of the Mariner, 'does not act, but is continually acted upon,' thereby assuming a relation to the Mariner" (Pafford 621). Both the Mariner and the Wedding Guest seem to be similar in the fact that both of them passively approach the situation; the Wedding Guest does not get up and leave but instead listens to the Mariner's story, and the Mariner quietly tells

his story to the Wedding Guest despite his protestations. Thus, they are both passive observers of the situation, although the Mariner is the one telling the story. If the Wedding Guest is seen as a projection of the Mariner or as the object of the Mariner's gaze and thus has no will of his own, his choice at the end of the novel to turn away from the wedding becomes more lucid given the Mariner's experiences with femininity, or lack thereof in *Life-in-Death*, and the homosocial environment of the ship to which he is accustomed.

It is an Ancyent Marinere

The third voice in the poem is the unidentified narrator who comments upon the action in the ballad and introduces the Mariner. It is interesting to note that the narrator opens the ballad immediately with a statement about the Mariner. The poem opens with the line, “It is an ancyent Marinere,” (1). This makes sense given the fact that the entire poem revolves around the Mariner’s story and the Wedding Guest’s relationship with the Mariner. The Mariner is described three times throughout the text, and every time there is a comment on his age and his hypnotic eyes. His age is three times described using the grayness of his beard: “By thy long grey beard” (3), “grey-beard Loon” (15), and the Mariner “whose beard with age is hoar” (666). Hoar refers to frost or dew, so the Mariner’s beard is sprinkled with white like a leaf is with dew. As in the first line of the poem, he is described one other time as “that ancyent Man” (43). Additionally, his bright eye is mentioned four times throughout the poem. He is “the Marinere, whose eye is bright,” (665), “the bright-eyed Marinere” (44), and the man with the “long grey beard and thy glittering eye” (3). The “glittering eye” of the Mariner is mentioned again in line 17, emphasizing the hypnotism of the Mariner’s gaze.

The hypnotism of the gaze has been described in detail earlier in regards to the Wedding Guest, but his age has not. It is obviously a notable point of concern for the narrator, as are the Mariner’s eyes, as it is mentioned four times throughout the ballad. The grayness of the Mariner’s beard is noted to show that the Mariner is elderly. This, in addition to being described twice as “ancyent,” is done in order to distance the Mariner who is telling the story from the Mariner’s story itself. The narrator wants to be sure that the reader understands that the Mariner’s story is truly a flashback, a story the Mariner

has told many times and upon which he has instilled his moralistic beliefs in retrospect. The Mariner “whose beard with age is hoar,” the “ancient man,” is the one telling the story and the one interacting with the Wedding Guest. Thus, the narrator’s prime objective is to distinguish for the reader the difference between the Mariner’s story with the moral and the objective of the poem, the Mariner who is relating his story to the Wedding Guest.

The narrator’s other function, as Owen describes, is to eschew, “as the Mariner does not the stylistic devices of repetition and climax, of arrangement of detail for oblique comment, typical of the ballad” (263). Owen also notices that the narrator only comments directly upon the action in the last two lines of the poem (263); prior to that the narrator’s comments have only been upon the Mariner’s appearance and his attempts to detain the Wedding Guest. In the final two lines of the ballad, as Owen notes, or rather the final two stanzas, the narrator re-inserts himself into the poem to provide the closing image. The Mariner’s moral finale about how God loves all, a conclusion that critics have found fault with for centuries, is actually not the end of the poem. The narrator’s final two stanzas are in reality the end of the poem and thus provide an essential point upon which Coleridge wants the reader to ponder. The stanzas read:

The Marinere, whose eye is bright,
Whose beard is age with hoar,
Is gone; and now the wedding-guest
Turn’d from the bridegroom’s door.

He went like one that hath been stunn’d
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and wiser man
He rose the morrow morn (665-672).

The narrator began the poem by commenting upon the Mariner, but he ends the poem commenting upon the Wedding Guest and, as Owen mentions, finally upon the action.

Just as the narrator opens and closes the poem with a commentary upon the Mariner, he also introduces the context of the wedding ceremony. The framework of the wedding adds an interesting level of depth to the poem. The marriage, the ultimate symbol of heterosexual unity, both opens and ends the poem, yet the Mariner, and by association later the Wedding Guest who leaves without attending the nuptials, are conspicuously absent from the festivities. The wedding serves as the contrapuntal noise and hubbub in the background, the Mariner and the Wedding Guest are absorbed with and focused on their own interaction. The sound of the wedding many times pierces the Mariner's story, and although the Wedding Guest wants to leave, he cannot - he is curiously drawn to the Mariner, his story, and his glittering eye. The narrator begins and ends the poem with mention of the wedding to bring the supernatural story back to reality, and in so doing, to show how much the Wedding Guest has been transformed by the Mariner's story. The Wedding Guest has been altered by the Mariner's story so much that despite the fact that he is "next of kin" and thus an integral part of the ceremony, he turns away from the wedding. The Wedding Guest has so far been under the spell of the Mariner and his "glittering eye" in such a way that he "cannot chuse but hear," and "the Marinere hath his will" (20). Finally at the end of the poem, however, the Wedding Guest has his will back again. It is noteworthy that his first choice is to turn away from the wedding. Regardless of his eagerness at the beginning of the poem to attend the wedding, the guest chooses to not participate in the ultimate symbol of heterosexual unity and decides instead to become like the Mariner - someone who chooses not to participate

in society and travels alone. The Wedding Guest turns away from the revelry and people and walks away alone and forlorn.

This choice to imitate the Mariner is especially fascinating given the fact that while the narrator describes the appearance of the Mariner four times, the Wedding Guest's appearance is never illustrated. This makes sense if Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and the role of the Wedding Guest were reexamined. If the Wedding Guest is the object of the Mariner's gaze and a representation of the Mariner's ego, then it would make sense that he is never described. His function is to be the mirror of the Mariner, and the Mariner's choices become his choices. Just as the Mariner chooses to shun society and travel "alone on a wide wide sea" (645), so the Wedding Guest turns away from the wedding to ponder the Mariner's story on his own and awake a "sadder and wiser man" (671) as the Mariner appears to be. Thus, the narrator inserts upon the poem not only the framework of the marriage and the description of the narrator, but also the true moral of the poem, unlike the Mariner's moral which is about self-discovery, but the moral that the Wedding Guest is not actually a true character in and of himself but a representation of the Mariner's desires and feelings.

The Pious Bird of Good Omen

The three voices, the roles of which have been analyzed in detail, were in fact the original voices in Coleridge's text. He introduced the Gloss in 1800 in order to quell the consternation of the critics and to satisfy public opinion. The Gloss, many theorists have pointed out, seems to impose a moral order upon the poem that the Mariner's story does not. While the text seems to offer no reasoning for why the Mariner shoots the bird, the gloss happily adds a moralizing system of crime and punishment upon the work. However, it is a moral order that Coleridge thinks will satisfy his audience, not a moral order in which he truly believes.

Wordsworth, in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, listed among the defects of the poem, "that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and...that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated." Thus, Coleridge's goal by adding the Gloss would have to be to demonstrate that the events of the poem did in fact produce each other. However, he did not want to make it seem as though he, himself, were commenting upon the poem. Rather, he added the Gloss using language that did not mirror the language in the text of the poem itself.

As first Huntington Brown and then later Anne Mellor have pointed out, "Coleridge has carefully insured that the gloss...is not presented as the authorial voice of the poet. The gloss is clearly a dramatic monologue or interpretation provided by a distinctly individuated persona. Specifically, the gloss-maker is a highly educated seventeenth-century English Christian" (Mellor 145). The language of the gloss-maker is clearly different from both the narrator and the Mariner through the use of "adjectival clauses, frequent parallel constructions, paired nouns and verbs, and extended similes"

which are all “characteristic of the elaborate prose styles of the early seventeenth century practiced by Jeremy Taylor, John Donne, Izaak Walton, the travel book writers from who Coleridge derived specific verbal echoes, and later by Thomas Burnet” (Mellor 145). This differentiated voice of the gloss-maker is clearly seen in the first line of the poem. The gloss-maker writes, “An ancient Mariner meeteth three Gallants bidden to a wedding-feast, and detaineth one.” The use of the antiquated “eth” for the verbs, not only in this passage but in all passages throughout the poem, clearly sets the gloss-maker aside as a separate voice from either the narrator or the Mariner.

Aside from the linguistic differences, Mellor has also postulated that the gloss-maker is clearly an “English Christian.” It has been long recognized that the Gloss seems to impose a sort of moral order upon the poem, an order that the poem does not seem to suggest. As Lipking proposes, the gloss does not “confine itself to facts. Again and again it interprets the narrative by reading it as a parable. In the world of the gloss, actions have consequences, parts fit into wholes, and human motives are not arbitrary” (615). Looking at the first comment by the glossist about how an ancient Mariner meets three “gallants” on their way to a wedding feast and detains one, the word “gallants,” as Lipking further postulates, “not only tells us something about the dress and social class of the three, but implies judgment upon them” (615). This is not the only time the gloss-maker implies a judgment upon the text, but it is the first.

The most well-known judgment is when the Mariner kills the Albatross. The gloss-maker notes that “The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen” at the end of Part I. The word “inhospitably” seems to confer a negative assessment of the Mariner’s actions, one that the text “I shot the Albatross” (82) seems

purposefully to omit. In addition, the word “pious” seems to imply that the bird is a dutiful bird that is symbolic of religion, as birds are normally not described as “pious” and thus devout and virtuous. The Mariner’s crime then becomes a religious crime, and this is made so by the gloss-maker. So, while the text seems to offer no reasoning for why the Mariner shoots the bird, the gloss happily adds a moralizing system of crime and punishment upon the work.

Dyck notices that the question of morality seems to enter the ballad, not through the other two voices of the Mariner or the narrator, but through the editor of the Gloss. She also notes that the gloss-maker continues to judge the crewmen as being accomplices to the Mariner’s crime through the lines “But when the fog cleared off, they justify the same, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime” in Part II, a judgment that, again, the text shies away from. Lines later the gloss-maker again notes, as the Mariner and his fellow seamen are dying of thirst, “the Albatross begins to be avenged.” Dyck notes, “It is the editor who introduces, articulates, and stresses throughout the theme of crime and punishment...Nowhere does he recognize in these stanzas the intense loneliness, weariness, or sense of wonder which are present in the poetry of the Mariner’s tale” (596). Nor does the gloss-maker, or editor if you will, comment upon the relationship of the Wedding Guest and the Mariner. Rather, the gloss-maker seems to focus on offering causation and effect to the events in the Mariner’s story that appear to have no cause.

Mellor agrees that the gloss-maker is a moralist, stating that whenever “scientific laws fail to establish a necessary relation between the occurrences related by the Mariner, the gloss-maker assigns a moral causation to them” (147). In addition to the two lines

above, the gloss-maker also attributes the Albatross around the Mariner's neck to the angry seamen. At the end of Part II the gloss reads, "The Shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient mariner: in sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck." The text merely says that the "Albatross about my neck was hung" (141-142), not directly stating how it was hung about the Mariner's neck. In its ambiguity, the text itself implies that the Albatross is a symbol because it is mysteriously found up on the Mariner's shoulders. Alternately, the gloss-maker, again, implies penance, where the Albatross is hung around the Mariner's neck as punishment for his crime. The gloss-maker, by adding these lines, takes an important symbol and brings it down to a question of simple crime and punishment.

This Christian moralistic view is repeated again and again by the gloss-maker through words like "penance," "envieth," which note is one of the seven deadly sins, and "curse" in Part IV. The gloss-maker also notes that the water snakes are "God's creatures of the great calm." In Part V the gloss-maker notes that the seamen are brought back to life "not by the souls of the men, nor by demons of earth or middle air, but by a blessed troop of angelic spirits, sent down by the invocation of the guardian saint." The gloss-maker mentions angelic spirits twice more in the poem, again highlighting the fact that the gloss-maker is clearly a Christian and is attributing the elements of the Mariner's story to his morals of sin and redemption.

The gloss-maker also explains the Mariner's continuous travels as "the penance of life" that has befallen him after the Hermit's forgiveness to teach "by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth." Again, the gloss-maker seems intent upon pushing his own agenda upon the reader, and this is seen especially in

the gloss-maker's final comment about teaching "reverence to all things that God made and loveth." This misreading fails to take into account the word "us" that the Mariner uses in his story. The Mariner tells the Wedding Guest that "the dear God who loveth us / He made and loveth all" (620-621). The word "us" is the important word in the Mariner's moral, for it explains that the Mariner has found acceptance of himself and believes that God loves him, as He does all creatures upon the earth. Yet the gloss-maker makes the moral of the story not about the Mariner but about God, and he does this because he, as one of the four separate voices, tries to explain the supernatural events in the poem as allegorical of the Christian belief of sin and redemption, an allegory that the text itself – the Mariner's story and the narrator's comments – specifically seem to avoid.

It is important to remember that Coleridge added the Gloss in 1800 – it was not part of the original poem – and he did so upon condemnation of the supernatural elements in the poem that, as Wordsworth publicly stated, did "not seem to produce each other." The gloss, then, is a response to the public, a statement that tries to make the poem fit within the boundaries of societal moral beliefs, in order to satisfy the public. The gloss, and the changes Coleridge made, were not part of his original intention, which was arguably a story about personal acceptance and self-knowledge. The fact that the poem morphed into a statement beyond its original intention can be seen in Coleridge's changing Argument at the beginning of the poem. In 1800 he changed the Argument to marry with the religious implications of the gloss, but it is important to note that he changes it back to resemble its original in the 1817 version, perhaps because despite all the changes Coleridge made to the text, it was still not well-received, and he wanted to restore a little bit of integrity to his masterpiece.

One change between the original and final publication of the poem was the title. In his original 1798 version, the title read, *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere, In Seven Parts*. The archaic spelling of the words “ancient” and “mariner” added an antiquated feel to the poem right from the start. Upon critical condemnation for both the antiquated spelling and confusing morality, however, Coleridge changed the title for the 1800 publication to the more modern spelling of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and he added the subtitle, *A Poet’s Reverie*. As Mellor points out, a reverie “need not be taken seriously by rational men; it is a mere fancy, a toy, a wanton pastime which may give some fleeting pleasure” (*English Romantic Irony* 143). Thus, Coleridge seems to be undermining the serious intentions of his original poem and despite that, not satisfying the critics who would have preferred a poem without moral, a poem of pure imagination. So after Coleridge failed to satisfy critics and himself, Coleridge omitted the subtitle from the 1817 version so it mimicked the original title, but kept the new spelling.

In addition to the changes in title, Coleridge attempted to alter the opening Argument to satisfy critics, but that, too, fell short of approval and failed to truly marry the imaginative qualities of the poem with the moralizing ending in the eyes of the public. The original 1798 Argument reads:

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.

In the 1800 edition, Coleridge attempted to instill more morality into his poem through the addition of the Gloss and the deletion of certain stanzas. He also altered the opening

Argument, introducing moralizing statements about the Mariner's actions. The new

Argument reads:

How a Ship, having first sailed to the Equator was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; how the Ancient Mariner cruelly, and in contempt of the laws of hospitality, killed a Seabird; and how he was followed by many and strange Judgments: and in what manner he came back to his own Country.

The new Argument, like the gloss that was introduced in this 1800 version, offers moral judgments upon the Mariner, judgments that were not present in the original version. The new Argument tells the reader that the Mariner killed the Albatross "in contempt of the laws of hospitality" and he was followed by "Judgments." Thus, the new Argument implies a causation and effect, as does the gloss, upon a poem that is merely a "Poet's Reverie."

Again, this Argument that offers cause and effect on a story that Coleridge admits in his subtitle is supposed to be a work of pure imagination, failed to satisfy critics. Thus, in Coleridge's final version of the poem, published in 1817, he introduced an Argument all in Latin, a quote by Thomas Burnett, which, when translated, reads:

I can easily believe that there are more invisible natures than visible ones among the entities in the universe. But who will explain for us the family of all these beings? And the ranks and relationships and distinguishing features and qualities of each? What they do? What places they inhabit? The human intellect has always tried to approach knowledge of these matters, but has never touched it. Meanwhile, I do not deny that it is sometimes better to represent in the spirit as on a tablet, the image of a greater and better world, lest the mind, used to the daily occurrences of life, contract itself and subside completely into petty thoughts. But at the same time we must be vigilant for the truth and keep due proportion, so that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night.

This, like the other changes made to the Argument, try but do not fully explain to readers and critics the full import of the poem. This Argument is closer to Coleridge's original,

and at least it does not diminish the poem's credence as a "Poet's Reverie" or place value judgments on the Mariner before the story even begins. However, while this Argument asks rational men to explore the irrational universe of invisible spirits and to take his poem seriously, he still diminishes the purport of his poem by asking the reader to distinguish the imaginative elements of the poem from the rational events, and thus places a more overt purpose on the poem than its original version. While the Argument and title are not inclusive of one of the voices of the poem, they are crucial pieces of the poem, and thus must be analyzed, in order to truly understand the introduction of the Gloss in the 1800 edition, and what effect the Gloss, one of the four voices, had on the telling of the poem and on the reader's understanding of the poem.

As mentioned, the Gloss was introduced in the 1800 version of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was published again in *Sybilline Leaves*, albeit not the first poem in the publication as it was in 1798. Coleridge added the Gloss, and the moralizing Argument juxtaposed with the subtitle "A Poet's Reverie" in order to satisfy critics, and Wordsworth, who believed that the events of the poem did not seem to produce each other, nor did the moral of the poem make sense. By introducing a new voice into the text through the Gloss, Coleridge, arguably, hoped to provide his readers with insight about the inner workings of his poem. However, this, too, seemed to confuse critics more than it did aid them, as adding a separate voice did not effect the full change to the poem itself that the critics desired.

Yet Coleridge was never fully able to part with his poem. A full overhauling of the poem and its events that "do not seem to produce each other" into a religious allegory, not by adding a Gloss but by truly reworking the text itself, would arguably

have pleased critics. Although Coleridge worked for nineteen years on revising the poem, he could never quite make the required changes necessary to satisfy critics. He deleted certain stanzas, he added a moralizing Gloss, he modernized the spelling, and he altered the opening Argument, but he never changed the relationship between the Mariner and the Wedding Guest, the Mariner's imaginative story of arbitrary events, or the characters themselves. Had he done this, he would surely have gained acclaim, both in the eyes of Wordsworth and the British public, but he did not. Some might argue that it was pure laziness that prompted subtle changes instead of an overhaul of the poem, but it is important to remember that Coleridge worked on altering the poem for almost twenty years. Coleridge wanted to satisfy his readers, but he could not because the poem meant so much to him personally, perhaps because it was written in response to very private events going on in his own life, namely the dissolution of his friendship with Wordsworth, and he could not completely abandon the personal connections he had with the poem.

Conclusion

Coleridge's masterpiece, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, haunted him professionally and personally for more than twenty years. He was so upset over the public condemnation over the original publication that he drastically altered the poem over the next twenty years, and in 1817 published a version that omitted many stanzas and added a gloss to help the confused reader. However, it is telling that Coleridge never deleted or changed the poetic closure of his poem, even though many critics believed that it did not successfully conclude the Mariner's story, and these critics openly voiced their confusion. Instead, Coleridge added a gloss, a new authorial voice, that attempted to explain the poem but ironically left the readers and critics alike more confused than before. Coleridge's poem is truly a masterpiece and remains one of the most notable pieces of poetic literature today expressly *because* of its ambiguity. It has been explained as a Christian allegory, as an experiment in Romantic supernaturalism, and as a text with autobiographical connections, but none of these analyses have truly explained away the ambiguity in the poem. In fact, these analyses have only added to the critical discussion about the poem.

The poetic closure, however, of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* makes more sense when the poem is read through the lens of queer theory. The ambiguity that readers feel upon looking at the poem becomes analogous for the uncertainty the Mariner feels about himself and his gender identification. This interpretation allows for the ambiguity to be embraced rather than ignored or admonished for being an encumbrance to the story and the text as a whole. The moral that the Mariner discovers, then, is not one of Christian love but one of self-love and self-acceptance, a discovery that he has made

throughout his voyage and through his experiences of murder, loneliness, and ostracism from society.

At the beginning of the story the Mariner embarks upon his journey, passively experiencing the change in weather and the camaraderie of his shipmates. He, admittedly, shoots the Albatross for no apparent reason and immediately becomes an outcast amongst the shipmates. The murder of the bird, precisely because no reason is given and the Mariner himself seems not to understand his actions, can be seen as an action begun in the subconscious. His subconscious action immediately identifies the Mariner with the Albatross, although the Mariner might not understand the implications of the shooting. The Albatross is the only androgynous object in the natural world, and by having the Albatross hung around the Mariner's neck, he is immediately identified as in between genders. In the liminal space of the sea, which is rife with gendered binaries, the Mariner remains obliviously neutral with a symbol of nongender hung around his neck.

This gendered binary is again continued with the two figures, Death and Life-in-Death, that come to play a dice game for the Mariner's soul. Life-in-Death, a decidedly uncharacteristic model for eighteenth century feminism, wins the dice game and so wins the Mariner's soul. This game can read as analogous to the Mariner being caught one more time in between two genders, and again, the Mariner cannot choose – his fate is chosen for him. Only when the Mariner praises the water snakes, a decidedly phallic symbol of male virility, does the Albatross fall from around his neck, and the Mariner is brought home by the bodies of the dead seamen. It is upon making a decision about his gender proclivity that the Mariner begins to head homeward.

However, once he is home and back on land, he remains isolated from the members of society, wandering the world alone, telling his story. His journey of self-discovery upon the sea does not end happily; there is no feminine other waiting for him upon his return. Neither is there a masculine other waiting for him. Heteronormative societal rules of the late eighteenth century clearly denounced homosexuality, or sodomitical acts. This loneliness does not truly matter, though, because the Mariner loves above all to walk with “goodly company,” telling his story in which he has come to the conclusion that God loves him despite his personal choices.

The structure of the poem also aids this gendered interpretation. A marriage, the ultimate symbol of heterosexual normativity, frames the poem and provides a striking contrast with the Mariner’s story and his feelings of isolation. The Mariner chooses the Wedding Guest to tell his story to merely by looking at him; there is something in his face that compels the Mariner. At the end of the Mariner’s story the Wedding Guest turns away from the marriage, a celebration he has been eagerly waiting to attend and vocally interrupting the Mariner about, and leaves a “sadder and wiser man.” He has seen something of himself in the Mariner’s struggle, and the Mariner, in using Lacan’s theory, can be understood to have seen a reflection of himself in the Wedding Guest’s face.

It is interesting to note that Coleridge began writing this poem after a lengthy discussion with his close friend and confidant, Wordsworth. In fact, Wordsworth and he together came up with the idea of the poem, although Wordsworth later admitted that the finished product had seemed to take on a life of its own after their discussion. The period of friendship between Coleridge and Wordsworth marked the most productive in Coleridge’s life, arguably because of the friendship of the two. However, this amity

slowly began to fall apart after Wordsworth's public condemnation of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge worked for the next twenty years editing and altering his masterpiece, but his friendship with Wordsworth was never repaired and Coleridge fell into an opium haze from which he never returned.

Coleridge looked to Wordsworth for approbation and approval,⁹ and when he didn't get it, he continued to work diligently on revising his poem, even though Wordsworth had placed it farther back in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and had erased Coleridge's name from the credits. Coleridge's friendship with Wordsworth sparked the most impressive and productive literature from Coleridge, but the approbation of Wordsworth also inspired Coleridge to revise and edit his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* for the next twenty years, arguably *because* Wordsworth did not like it. In an ironic twist, Coleridge's life came to mirror the famous Mariner's whom he penned; both were forced to wander the world, alone amongst men, looking for someone to hear their tale.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was, and remains today, one of the most important literary figures in history. His poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* continues to be one of the most widely read pieces of literature in schools across the world. When it was first published, the poem was ahead of its time and was widely misinterpreted and its true moral overlooked. For the past two hundred years, even, critical examinations of the poem have tended to reveal inconsistencies rather than attempt to explain them. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has central if disregarded radical gender formulations that, when highlighted, help explain more fully the moral of the poem and Coleridge's

⁹ This is according to Adam Sisman in *The Friendship*, p. 312

decisions regarding the revision of his famous rime. Uncovering such gendered textual references places this poem in the broader context of critical discussion and allows its brilliance to continue to shine on through generations of literary exploration, albeit through a new gendered lens.

Works Cited

- Abrams, Meyer Howard. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971
- Abrams, Meyer Howard. *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of DeQuincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge*. New York: Octagon Books, 1971
- Babbitt, Irving. "The Problem of the Imagination: Coleridge." *On Being Creative and Other Essays*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932. 97-133
- Brown, Huntington. "The Gloss to the Rime of the Ancient Mariner." *Modern Language Quarterly* 6.3 (1945): 319-324
- Burg, Barry. *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean*. New York: New York University Press, 1982
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. J. Shawcross. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*. Ed. Perry Seamus. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. New York: Harper and Bros., 1856
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. 1. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Ed. Paul H. Fry. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999

- Dyck, Sarah. "Perspective in Rime of the Ancient Mariner." *Studies in English Literature* 13.4 (1973): 591-604
- Elfenbein, Andrew. *Romantic Genius: the Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. Ed. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1960
- Goodwin, Sarah Webster. "Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Frankenstein." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.1 (1991): 93-108
- Jackson, J.R. de J. *Coleridge: the Critical Heritage*. New York: Barnes and Noble Inc, 1970
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004
- Lipking, Lawrence. "The Marginal Gloss." *Critical Inquiry* 3.4 (1977): 609-655
- Lowes, John Livingston. *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927
- McDonald, Daniel. "Too Much Reality: A Discussion of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner." *Studies in English Literature* 4.4 (1964): 543-554
- McGann, Jerome J. "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner." *Critical Inquiry* 8.1 (1981): 35-67
- Mellor, Anne K. *English Romantic Irony*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980
- Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993
- Miall, David S. "Guilt and Death: The Predicament of the Ancient Mariner." *Studies in English Literature* 24.4 (1984): 633-653

- Owen, J. B. ed. *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads 1798*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1969
- Pafford, Ward. "Coleridge's Wedding Guest." *Studies in Philology* 60.4 (1963): 618-626
- Reiman, Donald H, and Reiman, Donald H. *The Romantics Reviewed : Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1972
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985
- Sisman, Adam. *The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge*. New York: Viking, 2006
- Warren, Robert Penn. "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Ed. James D. Boulger. New Jersey, Prentice Hall Inc, 1969. 21-47
- Whalley, George. "The Mariner and the Albatross." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Ed. James D. Boulger. New Jersey, Prentice Hall Inc, 1969. 73-91
- Williams, Anne. "An I for an Eye: 'Spectral Persecution' in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." *PMLA* 108.5 (1993): 1114-1127
- Wordsworth, William. Ed. *Lyrical Ballads*. London, 1800