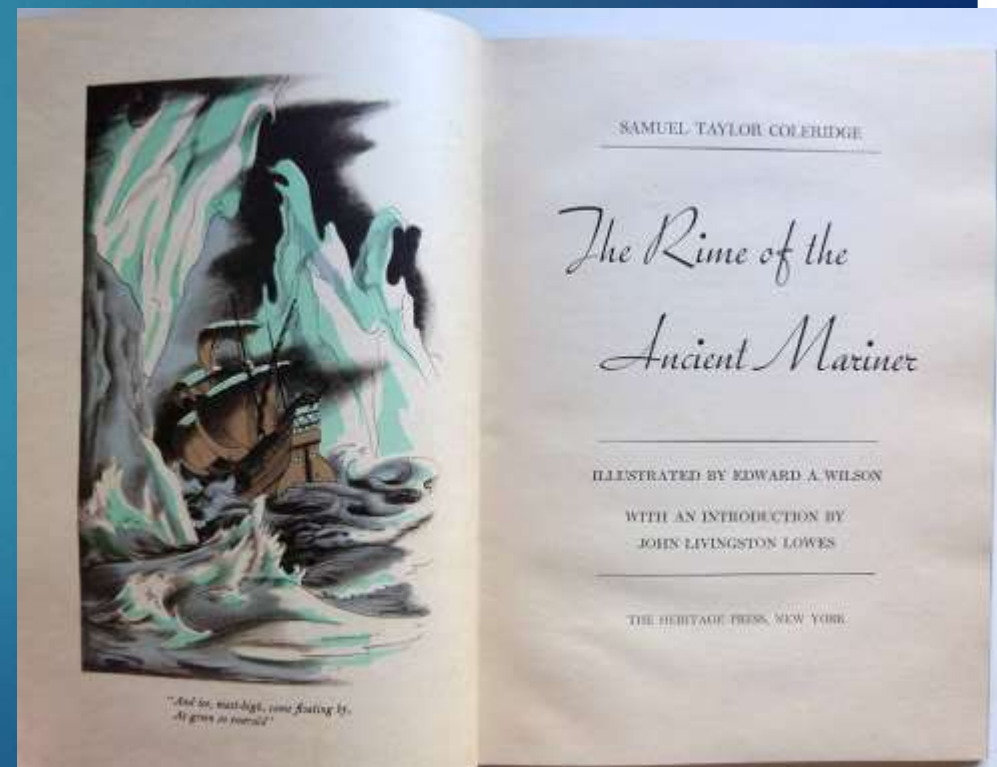


# Coleridge: Nature, Fate, and the Moral Vision of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Natalija Pop Zarieva,  
PhD

Goce Delcev University  
Stip, North Macedonia



# Interesting facts

- published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), - marked the beginning of English Romanticism.
- popular ballad form - a tale about a sea journey
- use of archaic language to mimic medieval storytelling

- ▶ Coleridge and the poem's dreamlike quality
- known for his opium addiction, which influenced much of his poetry
- includes the supernatural - is more than just a ghostly sea voyage



# Interpretative challenges

- ▶ ambivalent world represented through the story of a sea voyage
- ▶ obscure moral or lack of moral in the story

▶ veiled religious symbolism which produces the idea of a Christian view in which sin-penance-redemption govern the poem's world.

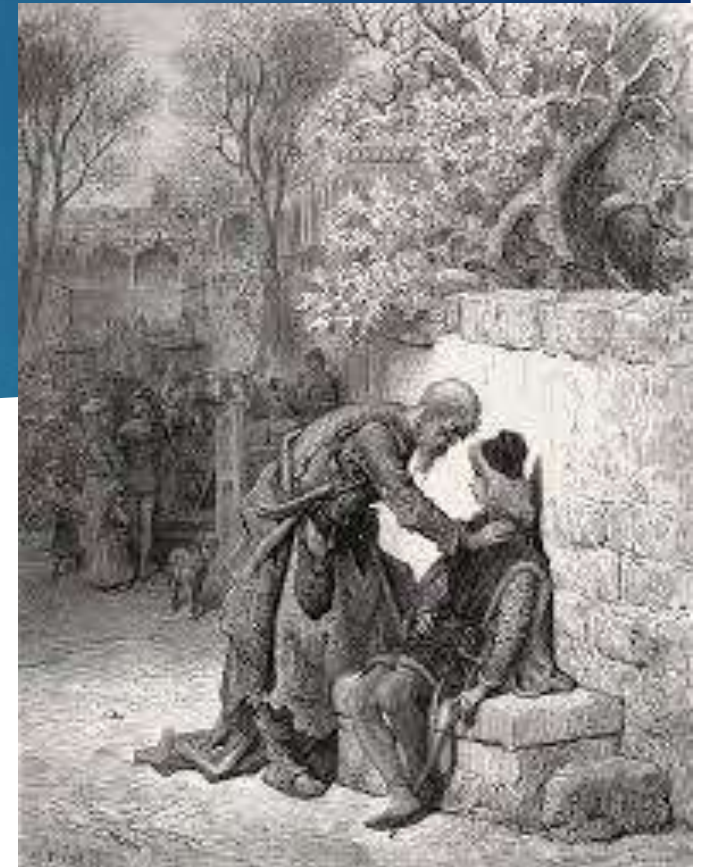
▶ on a deeper level they are challenged by a world that is governed by random evil forces, which come unexpectedly, and the punishment often outweighs the sin.

▶ unconvincing final moral, which does not explain the Mariner's horrific experience

A lone figure stops a wedding guest. His eyes glow with a strange intensity, and his voice carries the weight of suffering. He compels his listener to hear his tale—one of hubris, crime, and redemption. But why must he tell it? Why must we listen?

*“He holds him with his skinny hand,  
'There was a ship,' quoth he.  
'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!’  
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.*

*He holds him with his glittering eye—  
The Wedding-Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child:  
The Mariner hath his will.*



*“And now there came both mist and snow,  
And it grew wondrous cold:  
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,  
As green as emerald.*

*And through the drifts the snowy clifts  
Did send a dismal sheen:  
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—  
The ice was all between.”*



# The climax

*“It were a Christian soul.*

*We hail’d it in God’s name”* (lines 63-64).

-they had not seen a living creature for a long time, except the slimy creatures in the water.

-greet the appearance of the albatross as if it were a human being.

- its presence as a good omen.

-nine days as the bird has flown with the ship when the Mariner suddenly shoots it with an

arrow: *“With my cross-bow*

*I shot the ALBATROSS.”*



# Nature' forces

- ▶ The imaginary line of the equator - boundary of the natural and supernatural world / an entrance to the altered consciousness
- ▶ trapped in the lethargic situation, the *sailors* “*speak only to break/ The silence of the Sea*” (lines 105-6). Nature's forces become torpid.
- ▶ surrounded by water, they lack drinking water and suffer from dehydration. Irony: “*water, water, every where*”, they did not have a single “*drop to drink*” (lines 121-22).
- ▶ their tongues -“*wither 'd at the root*” (lines 136), unable to speak from dehydration; the only way they communicate with the Mariner is through their “*evil looks*” (line 139)

# Supernatural encounter

- ▶ in the distance “*a little speck*” (line 149), “*mist*” (line 150) and as it approaches, he recognizes the shape of a ship
- ▶ suffering from dehydration, the Mariner - unable to speak, he tears the skin of his arm with his teeth and drinks his blood in order to speak
- ▶ the sailors smirked seeing this and “*all at once their breath drew in/As they were drinking all*” (lines 165-66)
- ▶ blood spilling was previously caused by the Mariner in the killing of the albatross
- ▶ Communion- the symbolic consumption of Christ’s blood through ingestion of the sacred wine

*And is that Woman all her crew?  
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?  
Is DEATH that woman's mate?*

*Her lips were red, her looks were free,  
Her locks were yellow as gold:  
Her skin was as white as leprosy,  
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,  
Who thicks man's blood with cold.*

*The naked hulk alongside came,  
And the twain were casting dice;  
'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'  
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.*



# Fate

The fate of the Mariner and two hundred men is determined by the throw of dice- robs the poem of any logical, rational or moral interpretation as well.

- dicing element - a universe where logic and human moral system do not rule
- random and irrational forces which determine life and death



# Isolation and inability to die

- ▶ the crew is possessed by Death - die in succession
- ▶ movement of the two hundred sailors' dead bodies as they hit the deck one after the other "*with heavy thump*" (line 218). -auditory reminder of the Mariner's sin, as he perceives each man's death.
- ▶ their souls leave the body producing the sound of the "*whizz of [his] Cross bow*" (line 223). These sounds have enshrouded the Mariner's "*soul in agony*" (line 235).
- ▶ "my body dropt not down" (line 231); "could not die" (line 262).
- ▶ Mariner's alienation from them and the world intensifies, "*alone, alone, all, all alone/ Alone on the wide Sea!*" (lines 232-33).

# Guilt and suffering

- ▶ able to see the curse in the eyes of the sailors – he thinks he has done a hideous thing
- ▶ inexplicable irrational forces and principles governing the unknown
- ▶ **Would a Christian God condemn to such horrific destiny for a mere bird slaughter?**
- ▶ **Why did the crew die?** -not participate in the act, - merely approved of it, as they esteemed that the bird had brought them “*mist and snow*” (line 134) - deserve such terrible and sudden death?
- ▶ traditional earthly mores would not convict two hundred men with death for approving an unaware killing of a bird.
- ▶ newly acquainted world threatens to diminish the system of values that was part of the Mariner’s world so far.

Genesis 3:19 – After Adam and Eve sin, God says:

*"For dust you are and to dust you will return."*

-the idea that humans were formed from the earth (dust) and will return to it—emphasizing human frailty and mortality.

-empty of true emotions towards the world

-not able to pray -cannot understand his crime yet

Job 42:6 – After God speaks to Job, Job responds:

*"Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes"*

-deep sorrow, repentance, and recognition of God's greatness and his own limited understanding.

-powerless and insignificant his existence is

-feelings of guilt for the loss of his sailors

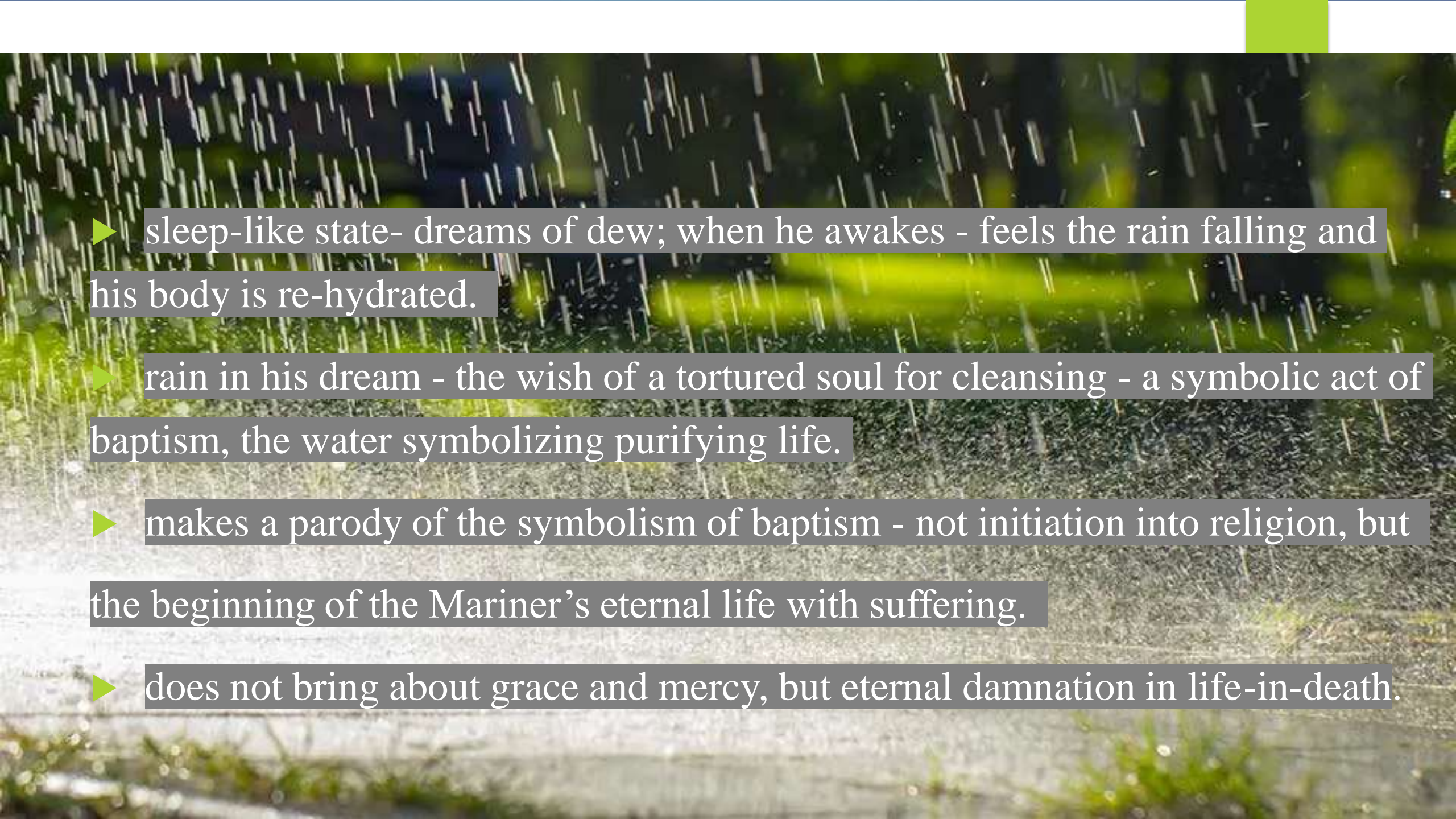
(no sign that he feels guilty for killing the innocent bird)



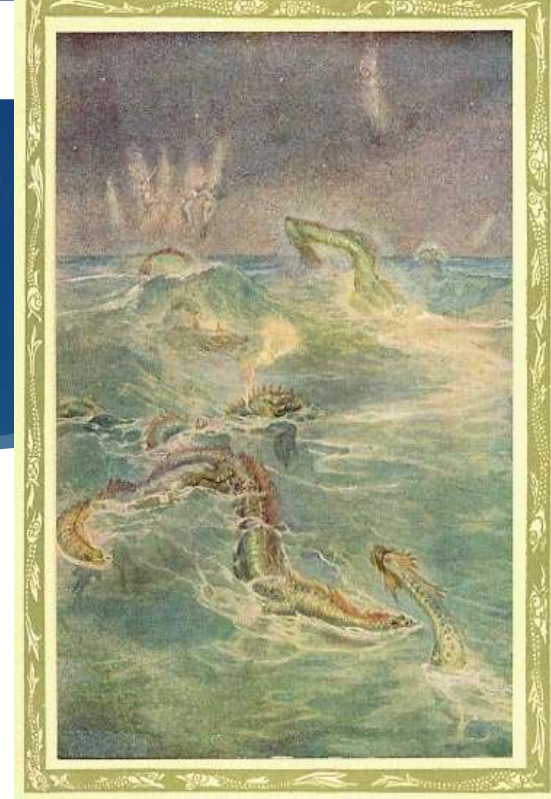
*I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;  
But or ever a prayer had gusht,  
A wicked whisper came, and made  
My heart as dry as dust.*

*"happy living things" (line 282).*

- observes the water snakes - a change in his perception, unconscious prayer

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- ▶ sleep-like state- dreams of dew; when he awakes - feels the rain falling and his body is re-hydrated.
  - ▶ rain in his dream - the wish of a tortured soul for cleansing - a symbolic act of baptism, the water symbolizing purifying life.
  - ▶ makes a parody of the symbolism of baptism - not initiation into religion, but the beginning of the Mariner's eternal life with suffering.
  - ▶ does not bring about grace and mercy, but eternal damnation in life-in-death.

# Religious Symbolism



- ▶ repetitive use of Christian vocabulary
  - ▶ *"Heaven's Mother send us grace!"* (line 177); *"To Mary Queen the praise be given/ She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,"* (lines 294-5); *"Sure my kind saint took pity on me, I bless'd them unaware"* (lines 286-7).
- ▶ the action of blessing - the ambiguity lies in the creatures that he blesses. **WHY SNAKES?**
  - ▶ the biblical serpent, which destroyed the ideal world of Adam and Eve by performing the same action of isolation
- ▶ introduced to point to religious interpretation of good and evil
  - ▶ the Mariner actually identifies with them, forsakes the religious set of values which he had earlier followed.

# Religious Symbolism



- ▶ crossbow - divine wholeness, completeness, and the nature of God Himself.
- ▶ 9 - fruits of the Holy Spirit: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*
- ▶ 7 - *Genesis 1–2: God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, blessing it and making it holy.*
- ▶ *"Instead of the cross, the Albatross/ about my neck was hung"* (lines 141-2) parallel of the albatross with Christ, represented by the cross.
- ▶ death of the bird evokes the death of Christ, - in killing a living thing without a possible explanation, we partake in the brutality which Jesus endured.
- ▶ suffering, bearing the guilt make the Mariner a martyr - a parody of Christ's crucifixion on the Cross



Problem of Evil: a note from January 11, 1805,

*“It is the most instructive part of my Life the fact, that I have been always prayed on some dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequences of some dread or other in my mind from fear of Pain, or Shame, not from prospect of pleasure.”*

(Coleridge’s Notebooks: A Selection, 2002, p. 76)

- ▶ In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit: *“Then the eyes of both of them were opened... and they hid from the Lord God...”* (Gen 3:7–8) They feel shame (about their nakedness), and act out of fear (hiding from God).
- ▶ the evil that is engendered from Original Sin of our fear of the evils in the world.



*Like one, that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And having once turned round walks on,  
And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows, a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread.*



# Nature as a Divine Force

- the albatross: a symbol of nature's benevolence and harmony
- nature as divine force:
  - winds and ice = nature's power
  - drought and death = nature's punishment
- Romantic ideal: nature is sacred and must be respected

- ▶ nature as sacred and interconnected with the spiritual realm. The natural world in the poem is not just a backdrop but an active force that responds to human actions.
- the albatross is initially a sign of divine grace—bringing good fortune to the sailors.
- its killing by the Mariner disrupts the harmony of nature, leading to catastrophic consequences.
- the supernatural elements in the poem (spirits, ghost ship, reanimated sailors) suggest that nature is not just material but spiritually alive.

*“He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast.”*

## The moral

The final statement “the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all,” (line 616-17) appears to have no reference to his experience.


- a loving God? -unclear why he would make the Mariner suffer eternal punishment for what is only a minor offense, but kill the two hundred sailors?

- His reply was that the poem had too much: *“It ought to have no more moral than the Arabian Night’s tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells inside, and lo! A genie 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 genie’s son.”* (English Romantic Writers, 1995, p. 520)
- explains more the idea of sin, than the lack of a moral in his poem. - a random act that is followed by punishment that outweighs the severity of the act.

# Guilt of the survivor

- ▶ lack of moral significance - psychological interpretation of the effects of the disturbing powers the Mariner is exposed to. - existing arbitrariness - the poem's reading as a major traumatic disruption in the Mariner's personality - attesting of the sudden death of his shipmates
- ▶ a devastating encounter with collective death - a "psychic closing-off" (p. 646) Survivors usually accompanied with an unjustified sense of guilt because they have survived - unworthy or merely being lucky.
- ▶ the rotting sea/the slimy creatures, points to himself/inner state- abilities are locked inside him/in a stasis - he is unable to pray
- ▶ he is stuck in a liminal condition
- ▶ groping towards understanding his suffering - yet does not fully understand it.
- ▶ *"Instead of teaching a lucid lesson about fate and guilt, he relates a powerful tale of suffering without drawing a clear conclusion."* (Andrew Goodspeed, 2017, p. 209)

- a story of darkness, diabolical forces and massive destruction
- without any logic or consequences that match the survivor's or the victims' crimes, like the Mariner's crime and the sailors' crimeless but terrible fate.
- learning about the dark side of humans and the arbitrariness of evil, cannot but make people sad
- this information transmitted between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest is never revealed to the readers
- the Wedding-Guest comes out changed after hearing the strange tale.



*The mariner, whose eye is bright,  
whose beard with age is hoar,  
is gone: and now the wedding-guest  
turned from the bridegroom's door.*

*he went like one that hath been stunned,  
and is of sense forlorn:  
a sadder and a wiser man,  
he rose the morrow morn.*

# Conclusions

- ▶ vague and intense open-endedness
- ▶ appropriates Christian language-inconsistent with the Christian doctrine
  - ▶ sin- does not correspond to the punishment
- ▶ does not get absolution- doomed to walk the earth forever telling his ghostly story- continues to suffer (sin-punishment-redemption)
- ▶ a universe that is reflection not of logical beliefs but of unreasonable fears and feelings of guilt.

“

“

In addition, the albatross of a 10 million debt is hanging around the industry's neck”

”

“FAME HAS BECOME AN ALBATROSS AROUND HER NECK.”

Does the poem fit within Romanticism, or does it feel more like Gothic literature?

***Thank you!***

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