THE MARINER IN THE MIRROR: THE IRONY OF DEATH IN COLERIDGE'S *RIME*

by
Karey Perkins

In Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, events are strange and supernatural, symbols are inconsistent, and the story line itself seems incoherent. Complicating it further is the gloss that Coleridge added later to the poem, which sometimes parallels, sometimes contradicts and confuses, the action in the poem. Puzzled by its meaning, critics have various views of the *Rime*. As early as 1798, Dr. Charles Burney called it a "rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence." Charles Lamb interpreted the poem as only a fantasy for mere entertainment. Many interpreters felt the poem meant only that life is just a meaningless game of dice; our fate is determined by chance.

Robert Penn Warren's famous reading in 1946 saw the *Rime* as a "sacramental vision" that affirms the Christian myth (the Mariner is redeemed). Since then, critics have found Coleridge's meaning more elusive. In 1981, in his article "The Meaning of the Meanings," Jerome McGann took a new historicist view, seeing the poem's interpretation as not only changing throughout its history, but also seeing the meaning of the poem changing through the many layers of history Coleridge conveys in the poem. Through Coleridge's use of style and language and cultural references that span time and place, including ancient superstition and pagan references, Christian ones, eastern ones, and western ones, the poem stretches hundreds of years back in time, and yet contains voices up to (Coleridge's) present. McGann says there are four layers of development, "(A) an original [ancient] mariner's tale; (b) the ballad narrative of the story [somewhat more recent, still in the past]; c) the editorial gloss added when the ballad was, we are to suppose first printed; and (d) Coleridge's own point of view on his invented materials" (McGann 221). McGann discusses in detail these historical points of view, and says that RAM encourages diverse readings and interpretations. However, McGann says that, "The historical method of the '*Rime*,' however, had also prepared the ground for a thoroughly revisionist view of the poem, in which the entire ideological structure of its symbolist procedures would finally be able to be seen in their special historical terms. When that happens, the meaning of the 'Rime' emerges as a 'dramatic truth' of Coleridge's intellectual and religious commitments" (237). McGann exhorts critics to use a critical rather than a hermenuetical method to find Coleridge's meaning, in order to, in a direct contradiction to Warren's powerful interpretation and those that followed it, avoid making RAM an "object of faith" and enable it to be what it is, "a social and a historical resource" (237). McGann is obscure and evasive, if profound, and his and Warren's essays must be read for a thorough understanding of criticism of the poem.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is a confusing story of the supernatural and lends itself to the idea of "othering," and is itself an "other" in its strangeness and illogical events, so critics find it easy to use in any of those theories - Derrida, the feminists, post-colonial studies, ethnic studies - that expound on such things. "The Eastern Ancient Mariner," by Knox-Shaw, is a natural progression in criticism of the *Rime*, since Coleridge himself used an Eastern reference to explain the meaning of the poem, to defend its apparent lack of moral: "It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side

of a well and throwing the shells aside, 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" (Coleridge, qtd. in Williams 1125). Knox-Shaw continues McGann's historical approach in divining sources of the poem, and finds Hindu myth and Sanskrit writings and Indian tradition and taboos (for example, against killing birds) as some of McGann's many layers.

Anne Williams espouses similar themes, both feminist and psychoanalytic. She discusses first of all the Mariner's audience's discomfort with the poem's strangeness and Gothic elements, and attributes that to a patriarchal society that must have reason and sensibility, cause and effect. She castigates Freud for failing to recognize the "power of the mother" and psychoanalyzes Coleridge's need for mother. She calls "The Mariner" l'ecriture feminine, or feminine writing, or "the refusal to identify with the father and the laws of paternal discourse." Thus RAM, with its unusual and illogical progression of events, with its moon and sun that both sometime harbor good omen and alternating, with no cause, with bad omen; with its arbitrary act, the shooting of the albatross, which sometimes seem to bring ill fortune, sometimes good; and with its seamen laying down the "law of the father" on the Mariner, in a search for cause for bad weather, in a random universe, is l'ecriture feminine. She notes also, that according to Lacan, after birth, the child's unconscious anxiety for the rest of his life at the absence of his mother is compensated for by search for the father, and the father's "law and order." The Mariner's constant aloneness, his "oceanic isolation" (1118), is this post-birth experience of loss of mother of Lacan's and other psychoanalysts'. RAM has this ambivalence toward mother, who is all-satisfying and all-rejecting, with its beautiful, ravishing bride and its horrible, leprous, nightmarish "Life-in-Death." Also, drawing on many other symbols in the poem, such as the carcass of the albatross, the withdrawing of the ocean water, the undrinkable sea, the slimy snakes, she cites Kristeva's theory of abjection to describe the Mariner's realization of his corporeality and his dependence on his materiality. The poem is about the fragile "I," who, "to mend the break its birth necessitates, imagines a higher realm where no such gap exists. Entry into the symbolic is a creative act, for the self is thereby constituted" (1124). She concludes:

> [M]orality is a response to meaningless change and loss. Imagination defends against this knowledge. Small wonder then, that Coleridge could not produce the discursive analysis an extended definition of Imagination demands; the Gothic horror of The *Rime* was as close as he could come to imagining the unspeakable. (1127)

The poststructuralists have joined the crowd of RAM critics, for a poem that seems to defy critics' attempts to find meaning seems perfectly suited to those who feel there is no meaning. Frances Ferguson, however, is quick to say we must not dismiss the poem as having no moral and no meaning just because they are not readily evident: "The no-moral position seems patently unconvincing because it becomes an excuse for hanging one's confusions…" (250). She then goes on to cite the poems contradictions: the Mariner claims to be redeemed, speaking "good" words at the end, yet has "a decidedly malignant effect" on all he comes into contact with after his journey. The symbols at times seem good, at others, seem bad: the Albatross, the sun, the moon, among others. Other arbitrary events include the Mariner's stopping the Wedding Guest, and the gambling and awarding of the Mariner to "Life-in-Death" for an unknown reason, while the crew goes to "Death." She develops the poem's historical references as well, but

concludes with Coleridge's remarks in his *Biographia Literaria* that, if one understands a writer's writing, and his work is illogical and incoherent, one may assess that writer to be ignorant, but "until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding" (Coleridge, qtd. in Ferguson 260). Ferguson concludes that a reader can only "read texts that say what he already knows" (262), or rather, he can only see meanings in texts of which he is already cognizant. Coleridge says in The Friend that "virtue would not be virtue, could it be given by one fellow creature to another" (qtd. in Ferguson 262). In other words, only experience can teach new things, and the teacher can only convey to the student what that student already knows. The critics will continue to find their own meanings, partial truths, in the poem, and misunderstand or just plainly not apprehend Coleridge's greater truth which is unspeakable. "For Coleridge, as for the Ancient Mariner, the problem is that one cannot know better even about whether or not one is knowing better" (Ferguson 263).

Critical opinion generally agrees that, whether Coleridge had intended meaning or not, the poem's ineffable mystery is part of its message.

I will argue that Coleridge purposely rejects any one philosophical paradigm to explain himself, and points the reader to a different kind of message. The *Rime* rejects and criticizes systems and intellectual tenets, and instead calls the reader to experience, to love, to feeling, and to imagination, rather than analysis. This is the message of the poem itself, but more importantly and paradoxically, it is the message about life conveyed in the poem discovered through analysis. The *Rime* tells a story of a soul's spiritual journey that could end in love and unity, but does not. The Mariner fails to embrace his world with feeling, and so reverts to an attempt to gain understanding, and is sentenced to replay his story over and over again, to random guests in an arbitrary and alienated universe.

Coleridge's poem alludes to ideas of many other traditions, philosophers, and writers. He uses these other systems only partially, and then rejects them in their totality to establish the idea of their incomplete truth, that in each there was truth, but each was also not THE truth. Coleridge explains in his own words:

> My system, if I may venture to give it so fine a name, is the only attempt I know, ever made to reduce all knowledges to harmony. It opposed no other system, but shows what was true in each; and how that which was true in the particular, in each of them became error, because it was only half the truth. I have endeavoured to unite the insulated fragments of truth, and therewith to frame a perfect mirror. (Coleridge, Table Talk, qtd. in McGann 51).

Thus, paradigms shift continuously in the *Rime*; first the snakes are seen as evil, as in Christianity, then they are symbols of divinity, as in alchemy or Eastern thought. The sun and the moon are equally mutable. The color red seems to shift in meaning from positive to negative. The meaning of the albatross and the Mariner's shooting of it, shifts from divine to demonic from stanza to stanza. Coleridge's constant repetition and inversion of symbols and imagery obscure the *Rime*'s meaning. "The whole poem, in fact, is a journey into a mirror and out of it" (Chandler 402). Systems are merely metaphors, and their surface truths are changeable.

For Coleridge, what survives when one rejects the supremacy of systems and paradigms, of superimposed, rigid ways of understanding the world and structuring God and reality, is an intuitive and emotional truth, grounded in the Romantic emphasis on feeling. It is the will to love (McNiece 158). Understanding this "higher point of view," as Coleridge calls his view, entails an understanding of Romantic irony, the Romantic idea of imagination, and Coleridge's idea of primary imagination.

Coleridge found truth, of another realm than logical thought, to be ironic, flashes of insight occurring through meditating on dim, obscure images. They are beyond the grasp of clear conceptual understanding, beyond the artist's or reader's firm grasp on a conscious, cognitive level (McGann 52). Romantic irony, or the dialectic between two opposites, dictates that truth be glimpsed in the middle of two contrasting realities, neither of which are true in themselves. Even the truth in the middle cannot be held onto or grasped; it will ultimately lead to or be an instrument to lead one to another closer, more profound truth or insight because knowledge is a process, a journey, and not found at a stopping point at the end of the journey. Coleridge sees the poet "hovering between images. As soon as knowledge is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination" (Barth 8). For the Romantics, imagination was of primary importance, a conscious act to choose to feel, to be sympathetic, and to participate in the world. Rousseau says, "no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is animated and begins to transport him out of himself" (McFarland 20). William Hazlitt says, "Imagination is, more properly, the power of carrying on a given feeling into other situation…the impression must act by sympathy and not by rule; but there can be no sympathy where there is no passion, no original interest" (McFarland 16).

For Coleridge, this act of sympathy for and participation in the world extends itself further… Feeling, of which "imagination" is the organizing principle, is a center of stability that engenders illuminating truths in the midst of the darker unconscious. So imagination is a cognitive faculty of the highest order, "deeper and more comprehensive than mere understanding" (Barth 5). It is a capacity that belongs to us all and that allows us to shape the world of chaos that we live in, like the brain's ordering of experience through dreams. "Were it not for primary imagination, the world around us would be perceived as chaos: a mass of swirling atoms, a blur of colors, shapes and sounds. There is a deep underlying unity among them…but [they] would appear chaotic were we not able to shape them into meaning" (Barth 3).

Besides just an ordering and cognitive purpose, imagination has a connective purpose. The Romantics' emphasis on feeling and imagination finds its apex in the most powerful feeling, love, a supreme knowledge, "an intimate union of subject and object" (McNiece 158). For Coleridge, imagination is the path to love. Imagination, an act of the will, is a choice for something, and enables appreciation of beauty in the object, thus enabling compassion, identity, unity with the object. The act of love enables the lover to perceive beauty in the object, which otherwise is neutral, arbitrary, and without moral value. Beauty, therefore, is the subject's act towards the object, and not inherently present in the object. So love, and the redemption it brings, is wholly in the hands of the individual.

Thus, imagination is the key not only to the Mariner's understanding of his puzzling journey, but it is also the key to life, love and happiness, which seem to have escaped the Mariner at the end of his journey. This kind of love is identification, acceptance, community; its fruits are fertility and life; it is engendered or marked by an appreciation of the beauty in life through many ways. "Thus man is truly a creator, both through the perception (primary imagination) by which he actively unites himself to the created world around him, and through the higher degree of creation he exercises (secondary imagination) in expressing the unity of the world, aesthetically, in new shapes and creative forms" (Barth 5). Imagination resolves Romantic irony as well; it intuitively perceives hints of the truth, the intimations of an underlying unity of all opposites without eliminating either end of the spectrum.

Coleridge's *Rime* outlines an archetypal spiritual journey of life, death, and rebirth. The Mariner leaves the innocent, safe and predictable world of land and home, a normal world with its church and its lighthouse and its garden-bower, for the sea. He travels a perilous journey into a mirror world of chaos, confusion, and inversion, with unpredictable strange occurrences and exotic creatures and great trials, and he experiences a metaphorical, if not a physical, death. Then he returns to the understandable world, but does not understand it, and his transformed self cannot participate in it as he once had.

For Jung, the sea represented the unconscious: vast, dangerous, dark, beautiful, unknowable. All structure and form is lost at sea; it cannot be mapped. The sea can be a mirror, literally and figuratively. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, the Mariner enters a nonsensical world. In the unconscious world, just as in the Mariner's sea experience, symbols are inverted. The Mariner enters a holy and horrible realm, a mirror of the real world, where evil becomes good and good becomes evil, where reality, morality and causality are all equally uncertain, where there are "no fixities and definites" (Boulger 447). Ultimately, the Mariner must be stripped of everything, even his sanity and identity, even meaning and reality, for a true and total death.

Traditionally, in Christianity as well as other systems, water represents spirit, soul, salvation, and it does so here as well. The sea represents the Mariner's soul, and it is not a pretty sight (at first). He realizes the state of his soul: rotten. He says, "The very deep did rot" (ll. 123). In addition, the mariners and the Ancient Mariner all lack water, that is, love and communion. In the sailors' superstitious rejection of the Mariner because of his act of killing the Albatross, and in the Mariner's rejection of himself, they thirst for love and acceptance. He says, "And every tongue, through utter drought,/ Was withered at the root" (ll. 135-136). Throughout the sea journey, the Mariner's alienation from self, his fellow seamen, and his environment, is pictured as drought and thirst. Their throats are parched and, he says, "my heart [is] as dry as dust" (l. 247).

Ironically, though, just as in the frame story, where the Mariner is standing right outside the garden-bower with the bride inside, but not availing himself of the joys of the wedding feast, in the internal story, the Mariner stands in the midst of miles and miles of what? Water! "Water, water everywhere/nor any drop to drink" (ll. 121-22). On a practical level, it is sea water so he can't drink it. On a metaphorical level, Coleridge paints a picture of a Mariner who can choose, at

any time, to participate in the love and joy and acceptance of community, yet turns his back to this opportunity continuously, whether through guilt, self-absorption, fear, or ignorance.

When the Mariner attempts to connect with another ship (the ship carrying death, and life-in-death), he finds liquid when he needs it. "I bit my arm/I sucked the blood" (l. 160) He has to do this so he can call out to the ship, as his throat has been too dry to speak. It is at great sacrifice to him. He drinks his own blood; he is his own saviour (Chandler 405), but it has been there all along. This one act towards community causes all to drink. This is an act of self-sacrifice and love, for his fellow mariners, and for connection to another ship on the lonely sea. Critics Blythe and Sweet observe that the word "agape" in the lines can be read two ways:

> With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
> Agape they heard me call:
> Gramercy! They for joy did grin,
> And all to once their breath drew in,
> As they were drinking all. (ll. 162-166)

Traditionally, "agape" (a-gape) means that their mouths were agape, wide open, with thirst for water (and loving community). Also, it could be read as the Greek word for the unconditional love of God, "Agape" (a-gap-e). When the sailors hear this word, they find joy, they drink the liquid of life (Blythe & Sweet 370).

The Mariner transforms fear into love here, and earlier, when he blesses the water snakes and appreciates their beauty, instead of fearing them. In having the Mariner bless snakes, Coleridge challenges traditional Christian symbolism. He implies that it is not externally imposed metaphors that give us salvation, it is the meaning behind the metaphor, or the freedom to shirk off arbitrary, socially imposed rules, and to see that the truth is simple: to unite with and to love the world. The snakes "coiled and swam" (l. 280). Their joyful play, as well as their circular movement, symbolic of holiness in several traditions and also symbolic of unity and oneness, says that they are now good, a transformation accomplished by the Mariner through an act of his own imagination and love, when just a few stanzas previously he saw them as "slimy things." Momentary redemption is given by this act of love.

The Albatross is the perfect example of the arbitrary nature of symbols in the poem and Coleridge's rejection of any one philosophical system. The Albatross, often a Christian symbol, and the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross, often considered a sinful, selfish, willful, act, are representative of attaching moral value and condemnation to acts and objects. For Coleridge, this is wrong; our moral imperative is to love, welcome, and embrace the world. Thus, the traditionally positive interpretation of the Albatross can be rethought. For example, it is welcomed "As if it had been a Christian soul" (l. 65), implying that perhaps it was not. Also, the sailors don't know what to make of it, at one point it is good, at another it is bad. Sometimes, good weather is attributed to its presence; other times, bad weather is. In the *Rime*, the sailors' cause-effect logic, often contradictory, is clearly a "post hoc" fallacy, as is most of the events and objects in the poem that are attributed with a good or bad moral value (Grow 26). The Albatross is actually a neutral object, like the rituals of a religion, the specifics of a system, are neutral.

Also, the Albatross comes from the land of snow and ice, symbolically associated with hell in many literary works. In this sense, the white Albatross becomes a mirror, inverting traditional symbolism, and is demonic in that it represents the guilt/cross given to us by traditional Christianity and the burden of following society's arbitrary dictates. Also, notice that the Albatross is not ON the cross, like Christ was, but it IS the Mariner's cross in that it is hung around his neck.. "Instead of the cross, the Albatross/about my neck was hung (ll. 141-142). (Albatross sounds like cross as well). That makes the Mariner Christ, and the Albatross the evil that society, the conscious world, does to Him (and him) by imposing guilt and crucifixion for arbitrary acts. The only act that is evil, for Coleridge, is the failure to love. The Mariner's guilt is self imposed (and socially encouraged); the burden of the Albatross to the Mariner is that he accepts it and accepts the sailors' condemnation, signified by the bird around his neck. When the Mariner blesses the sea snakes, not only does he love, but he transcends the Christian paradigm by embracing that which is considered traditionally evil. The cross drops off his neck. "The self-same moment I could pray/…the Albatross fell off and sank" (ll. 188, 190).

Furthermore, the polar spirits, who also come from the land of ice and snow, love the Albatross. If the polar spirits are seen as "good" or holy, as they often are, the Albatross is an emissary of them, and becomes good as well. But the spirits do not forgive or absolve him, they can only give him penance and punishment, the domain of hell and purgatory, not heaven. Note also that they cannot say the name of Christ: "" Is it he?' quoth one. 'Is this the man?/ By him who died on the cross,/ With his cruel bow he laid full low/The harmless Albatross." (ll. 398-401). Just as Dante's souls in hell are unable to utter the name of God because they have been condemned, so these polar spirits, in Coleridge's hell, cannot say God's or Christ's name. However, the Mariner can say the name of Christ: "The very deep did rot: O Christ!" (l. 123), just as Dante, the lone uncondemned soul, can do so in the Inferno.

In the middle of the poem, the Mariner meets Death and Life-in-Death. A mirror of the Bride (Chandler 406), Life-in-Death's red lips, free looks, gold hair and leprous skin makes men's blood cold. While the Bride, who is about to marry, represents love, community and communion, Life-in-Death represents fear and deathly existence. That is, not death itself, which gives way to rebirth and transformation, but an existence that cannot die, and therefore cannot be changed and transformed, and in its stasis, deteriorates, rots, but survives zombie-like, just as the Mariner and the sailors do after their encounter with her.

When Death and Life-in-Death cast dice for the Mariner's soul, and Life-in-Death wins, we expect that this is beneficial for the Mariner. Instead, the sun sets, the stars dim, night rushes in, and the sailors all drop dead. The Mariner's life-blood drinks the communion blood of fear ("Fear at my heart, as at a cup, My life-blood seemed to sip!" (ll. 204-205)). For the rest of the poem, those that the Mariner encounters view him as the walking dead. They experience fear and shock that this skeleton, this unearthly creature, can actually talk. They react to him as though he were one of the zombie-sailors, and he repeatedly must reassure those he meets that he did not die during his treacherous journey, and in fact, he is still alive.

It would have been better for the Mariner had Death won, had he been able to die and receive new life. Death is seen as desirable even to the Mariner; when he says he dreamt, "I thought that I had died in sleep,/And was a blessed ghost" (ll. 307-308). Because he does not die,

he can never experience new life; he will never enter the wedding feast, nor is he capable of love and community for the rest of the poem. He no longer can appreciate beauty in life; he only sees death and evil images. He experiences alienation from his fellow sailors, often repulsed by their deathlike-zombie state, but he is more like them than he realizes, and perhaps is dead himself, as they are. He says, "I moved, I could not feel my limbs" (l.305); and his "body" (not his self or soul) floated on the water after the ship sunk (l. 552). He has the same effect on others as the sailors have on him. He is described with the appearance of a corpse, skeletal and decayed. Yet he lives on, a lonely existence, because he is life in death. In his spiritual stasis, he decays, and cannot grow forward in his spiritual journey.

What he has not died to is rationality and rules and the need for understanding. He still attempts to grasp and perceive his world intellectually, retaining surface tenets of religious tradition. He follows the Hermit's advice, instead of rejecting it.

The Hermit represents the Christian system, as the Mariner's ending moral is the creed of the Christian system. The hermit is a mirror and an inversion. This hermit is a hypocrite, not a prophet who lives in the desert in physical and spiritual desolation, in the dark night of the soul, the place from which the Mariner has just returned. The Mariner says of his journey, "Alone, alone, all alone/alone on a wide wide sea/So lonely 'twas, that God himself/ Scarce seemed there to be" (ll. 232-235). The Mariner is actually the voice crying out in the wilderness, the lonely, suffering voice who sees the truth, and should see the superficiality of religious rules and rituals. But the Hermit loves to talk to people, has many visitors, sits on a cushioned stump (that is rotted beneath; an indication of the state of his soul). He "singeth loud his godly hymns" (l. 510), proclaiming his false piety to the world. He cannot function as an instrument towards the Mariner's salvation because he is too comfortable in the land of the living, has not traveled the journey of death and rebirth, and knows nothing of real love.

The Mariner is the stronger, more mature soul. It is the Mariner who overpowers the Hermit, not vice versa: "The Hermit stepped forth from the boat,/And he could scarcely stand" (ll. 571-2).) His shaky land legs are also indicative of the fact that he has encountered a creature of the sea, and he has entered a different realm - the unconscious - where he was very uncomfortable, and where he does not move easily into or from. The Mariner, who has been at sea for much longer, is the character that we would expect to have weak legs as he disembarks the boat (Delson 718). And further, the Hermit has no great wisdom that is not available to the intuitive knowledge of the common man. While the Hermit is wise enough to recognize that the Mariner comes from hell, brings a message back to the living, a hard terrible message that no one wants to hear, he is still no wiser than anyone else. The Wedding-Guest also fears the Mariner ("I fear thee, ancient Mariner!" (l.224)); the Pilot ("it hath a fiendish look" (l. 538)), and the Pilot-Boy ("the devil knows how to row" (l. 569)) recognize who he is as well.

The hermit (and his creed) are the inadequacies of the traditional Christian system for the soul that has journeyed beyond it.

The Mariner can no longer go back to the state of innocence (or ignorance if you will) after he has eaten of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Hermit's penance for the Mariner, even the Mariner's request for absolution is inadequate and ineffectual because the

Mariner has moved beyond the institutional church. His mistake is attempting to return to that system - spiritually, to the idea of sin and absolution, and intellectually, "to the laws of logical thinking and causality" (Boulger 450). Intellectually, he is in a more advanced place - the intuitive realm. Spiritually, his task is not about expiating sin, it is a far greater task. It is about choosing to love.

Behind the Mariner is the wedding feast: the bride, the music, the celebration, the community. The bride's red lips are enticing; symbolizing life, sexual union and the communion of love. Yet he is oblivious to all of this in his intent focus on his unhappy plight and his obsessive need to spill the unhappy story to selected strangers, keeping them, and him, alienated from the wedding feast, from each other, from participation in community. All he has to do is choose to turn around - literally and metaphorically - and enter the community of love. This act has been his to choose constantly, implying that his hell is self imposed.

The Mariner's "salvation" can be evaluated only on those grounds. The one consistent truth we find throughout the poem is that the Mariner finds peace and joy depending on whether or not he loves. At times in his journey, the Mariner loves, and he has the potential to love throughout. When he loves, the universe is friendly, the once slimy snakes become beautiful, the other ship is one of salvation, and he, also, is embraced by his community. When he does not, the very same symbols and objects become dangerous, frightening and alienating. At the end of the poem, the Mariner's choice is to gush religious platitudes and turn his back on the [G]arden and the bride and celebration of love behind him, also turning the Wedding guest from the bridegroom's [Christ's] door, like the angel with the flaming sword guarding Eden from the fallen Adam and Eve. Thus his sentence of estrangement, of repetition-compulsion, of death-in-life. In the end, the Mariner does not love, and is not redeemed. In the death he rejects, is life.

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