

# Morals in the rime of the ancient mariner: appreciation of life

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Anna Barbauld may have believed that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* had no moral, but Coleridge is correct when he insists that “the poem had too much” (qtd. in Coleridge 6: 272). The moral of his ballad is to appreciate all forms of life. To develop this theme, Coleridge utilizes imagery and symbolism to create an implicit partnership between Life-in-Death and the Moon. The purpose of their partnership is simple; they both serve to punish the Mariner for his crime. In the end, their goal is to teach him a lesson that he will never forget. To understand how they achieve this goal, one must first examine how the Moon sets up the premise of the theme. When the Moon is first seen, the Albatross is still alive and the Mariner remarks, “Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white / Glimmered the white moon-shine” (77-78). Even with the mist and fog, the imagery here is pleasant. Glimmered has a positive connotation that implies beauty, whereas white is a pure color that often represents innocence. One realizes that in this scene, the Mariner and his crew have the Moon’s blessing because they receive the bird with hospitality. Though it appears the Moon is not concerned either way, it becomes clear that she is when there is a shift in the visual language. Once the Mariner shoots the Albatross, the pleasing imagery turns menacing to reveal the Moon’s disapproval of the Mariner’s actions. Now, the Mariner notices, “The death-fires danced at night; / The water, like a witch’s oils, / Burnt green, and blue and white” (128-130). Though the Moon is not mentioned directly, common knowledge dictates that the moon typically appears at night and the Mariner must have a source of light to see this. He bestows the death-fires, which sailors of this time period believed to be a sign of disaster. Instead of glimmered, the water burnt, a word that uses the

image of fire to create a sense of pain. Plus, the word oil portrays the water as greasy and repulsive. The imagery of this scene is crucial because it highlights the differences of when the Albatross was alive and when it was killed. This can also be inferred from the supplementary information on the side that declares, “ And the Albatross begins to be avenged” (260). At this point, one is aware that the Moon is not pleased because the Mariner shot the Albatross, but the reason for caring about the bird is still unknown. When Life-in-Death is introduced, the reason is revealed and the central theme progresses.

Although Life-in-Death and the Moon do not interact directly, their subtle partnership is depicted with the juxtaposition of beauty and terror. Life-in-Death’s beauty is one of the first aspects the Mariner notices as he describes her red lips and golden hair. However, he quickly adds, “ Her skin was as white as leprosy,” (192). The contrast of beauty and terror here is significant to the theme because of what they symbolize. Life-in-Death’s red lips and golden hair are all traits of the living, whereas white skin is akin to a corpse and leprosy was most likely fatal in this time period. Coleridge is equating beauty with life and equating everything horrific with death. Similar parallels are drawn between Life-in-Death and the Moon to emphasize this theme.

Later, the Mariner refers to the Moon as her for the first time and notices that she is moving. After mentioning that she abides no where he muses, “ Softly she was going up, / And a star or two beside— / Her beams bemocked the sultry main” (265-267). Compared to Life-in-Death, the Moon is also depicted as feminine with words such as softly and bemocked, as if the dry, unappealing landscape could not compare to her beams. Coleridge also

mentions her freedom and ability to move because that is how her beauty is symbolic for life; corpses cannot move by themselves, unless possessed by a spirit. Either way, they do not have the freedom of movement, which is another reason to appreciate life. Again, the Moon has the horrific traits that Life-in-Death possesses as well. As soon as Life-in-Death wins the Mariner's soul, the Sun immediately disappears and the Moon takes his place. The Moon is an image of terror as the Mariner recalls, "The horned Moon, with one bright star / Within the nether tip / One after one by the star-dogged Moon," (209-211). During this age, this impossible image of a lunar eclipse with one star in the shadow of the Moon was a sign of impending evil and evil is typically associated with death. Now, by looking at how Life-in-Death's and the Moon's beauty symbolizes life, compared to the horrific images that represent death, the theme slowly begins to build. One sees that life is beautiful and death is not, but that does not lead to the conclusion that life should be cherished. It is the seemingly careless actions of Life-in-Death that draw that conclusion. She wins over the Mariner's soul through a game of dice and though stealing a soul seems monumental, Coleridge spends one or two lines describing her victory. This act may seem random, but once compared with the crime of the Mariner, one realizes that this is the Mariner's punishment. The Mariner shoots the Albatross for no given reason. Life-in-Death randomly kills his crew and takes the Mariner's soul for no reason stated. When the Mariner notes that the souls flew by "like the whizz of (his) cross-bow", one can infer that this is about killing the Albatross. Now the finality of the message becomes clear; the Mariner did not appreciate the Albatross's life and he is punished for it. Through imagery and symbolism,

one sees that the Moon and Life-in-Death do not condone life being murdered. This is why they punish the Mariner. The Moon sets up the question of why life should be appreciated and Life-in-Death provides the answer; it is because one will be punished otherwise. Which, finally, ties back into the theme of appreciating all forms of life. The reason for appreciating all forms of life is not necessarily to avoid punishment, but the threat of being punished by Moon and Life-in-Death is what stresses the importance of this appreciation and makes it one of the main morals in the story.