

# *Another Member of the Wedding*

*Grace Tang*

**Writer's comment:** *When I first read Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner for my English 46B class, I was both struck and touched by the doomed but triumphant Mariner's desperate yet valiant need to communicate his feelings and experiences to the skeptical Wedding-Guest. In a way, the Mariner's situation is not unlike the average English student's. Writing can be a traumatic ordeal, placing any writer in a painfully vulnerable position. There is not only the danger of misunderstanding the work or subject itself, but the overwhelming risk of being the one who is misunderstood. Well aware of these dangers, I was convinced that I could not write a paper which would do even some justice to Coleridge and his consummate skill. After what seemed like fifty readings of the poem, twenty versions of the introductory paragraph, and one particularly frantic visit to my T.A., all I could do was to trust in Coleridge, whose unspoken faith in his readers surely must have moved him to produce this beautifully sympathetic and humanly sensitive work in the first place.*

*When Jane King, my T.A., suggested that I give Prized Writing a try, I was extremely flattered, but quite frightened, almost as scared as I was when writing the paper itself. I did not feel half as brave as the Mariner, but as with Coleridge, I decided to trust in Jane's generous faith in my abilities and to take a chance anyway. So I really owe this wonderful and unexpected honor to Coleridge and Jane. They were the only ones who believed in me when it counted most, and perhaps, it is time to start believing in myself as well. Sometimes we cannot all be literary geniuses who can detect every shade of meaning of a work instantly, or can write with the most eloquent of rhetorical flourishes. Sometimes it is just enough to be yourself. Pulitzer prize-winning writer I may never be, but "prized writer" I am, and that is doubtless more than I had ever wished for.*

*-Grace Tang*

**Instructor's comment:** *Grace Tang's evocative essay on the interaction between the frame and voyage narratives in The Ancient Mariner impressed me with its sensitivity to the poem's ambiguities. Grace was struck by the way in which the supernatural elements of the poem invade and undermine its overt Christian message, just as the ancient mariner invades the scene of the wedding and undermines the complacency of the wedding guest. While the essay was written in response to a general question about how the two narratives interact, Grace went beyond the general to write a compelling description of the menace and uncertainty in the poem's universe, the terrifying features which, as she shows, spill over from one narrative to another, as would happen if alternate universes were to "collide."*

*-Jane King, Teaching Assistant, English Department*

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In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, two worlds collide with each other: the world of reality in which the Wedding-Guest leads a happy and secure life and the nightmarish, unfamiliar realm in which the Ancient Mariner is doomed to lead a restless and tormented existence. Enfolded in the Mariner's tale of his voyage is the wedding feast, which not only offers the unsuspecting reader a framework of security and reality to cling to and depend on, but also provides an effective and revealing contrast to the old man's story. Although the ending explicitly reasserts the benevolent view of a pantheistic universe that the Wedding-Guest initially shares, the supernatural tale that is within the framework ultimately undermines and challenges this traditional and moral view of a boundless and divine cosmos, which soon proves to be somewhat harsh in this poem.

One of the many qualities represented by the wedding that is repeatedly repudiated by the Mariner's voyage is the sense of community that is positive and highly reaffirming of a Christian and loving world, but completely lacking in the supernatural one. Unlike the Wedding Guest who is "next of kin" (1.6) and who belongs to the rest of humankind, the Mariner experiences alienation on many levels. One level of alienation is the entire ship's estrangement from human civilization when it is lost in the mysterious and formidable Antarctic, in which the "ice [is] all between" (1.58) the whole crew and their homeland. Then the Mariner kills the Albatross, who is more than a good omen but "a Christian soul" (1.65), thus alienating himself further from his God-fearing shipmates and from the natural order to which this bird belongs. Forcing him to wear the dead bird around his neck for punishment, the shipmates also curse the Mariner as they die, a curse that is bitterly eternal: "Each turned his face with a ghastly pang, / And cursed me with his eye" (11.214-215). Of course, they do not die of their own free will just to alienate the Mariner, but they are forcefully taken by a spirit of the natural order, Death, who along with Life-in-Death seeks to wreak her own revenge upon the Mariner. Denied any human contact and utterly lost in the desolate sea, the Mariner is tragically and acutely aware of his alienation from the rest of humanity and the greater natural order:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony. (11.232-235)

Even though he is free of his nightmarish experiences as he compulsively tells the extremely reluctant and frightened Wedding-Guest his tale, the Mariner cannot go into the church and join the feast that makes a "merry din" (1.8). The estrangement is absolute and final for the Mariner in this poem.

Another important feature that separates the wedding from the voyage is that while the wedding is a celebration of the religious sacrament of marriage as well as of Christian love, the voyage is a threatening reversal of all these sacred rites. Revenge and hatred are not only apparent in the way the already-dead crew continue to "[fix] on [the Mariner] their stoney

eyes" (1.436), but in the cruel fashion that nature demands retribution. After the Mariner's sinful deed of killing the Albatross, the supposedly "glorious Sun" (1.98) becomes "bloody" (1.112) and relentlessly beats down on the entire crew whose "throats [are] unslaked, with black lips baked" (1.157). Ironically, the sun that punishes them mercilessly is "like God's own head" (1.97), a far from kind image of God, who definitely blesses the wedding that celebrates one of His sacraments. Even more ironic is that the supernatural moon is what indirectly relieves the Mariner of his immediate guilt. The moon's "elfish light" (1.275) illuminates water snakes that the despairing Mariner suddenly blesses "unaware" (1.287). Prompted by the strangely pagan moon, his blessing immediately frees the dead Albatross from his neck and the unbearable burden of his guilt from his soul. Another intriguing reversal is that the sun destroys and withers life instead of giving life, as it normally would in nature. Near dead with dehydration, the Mariner wakes to rain "[b]eneath the lightning and the Moon" (1.329), thus revealing the rejuvenating qualities of the moon, qualities that the sun should really have. The voices of the two demons which belong to the vengeful Polar Spirit, and doom the Mariner to "penance more will do" (1.409), also marvel at the moon's kindness and "how graciously / She looketh down on him" (11.420-421). This mild confusion within nature itself effectively reflects the catastrophism of this tale, which threatens to spill into the safe world of the wedding, and does in fact succeed.

The wedding also symbolizes a new beginning, a new life between the bride and groom, but as a sharp contrast, the voyage breeds nothing but death and doom. Yet death seems entirely purposeless when we consider not only the unaccountable death of the Albatross that has harmed no one, but also the whimsical dice game between Death and Life-in-Death that has determined the death of two hundred crew members. As for doom, it also seems far too harsh and aimless when we witness the Pilot's boy who "now doth crazy go" (1.565) upon laying his eyes on the cursed Mariner. Another life that seems to be just beginning, but has been ruined, is the Wedding-Guest's own. Passionately unwilling to listen to the Mariner, he is held in thrall by the old man's "glittering eye" (1.13), and is subsequently drawn into the nightmare. Suddenly, the two worlds do not just collide, but merge at the final moment when the helpless Wedding-Guest "Turn[s] from the bridegroom's door" (1.621) just as alienated and cursed as the Mariner is. He not only misses the wedding-feast and the chance to take part in its security and joy, but is frightened by the supernatural tale which he has just been forced to hear. Repeatedly crying, "I fear thee and thy glittering eye" (1.228), the Wedding-Guest attempts to repulse the Mariner, but only falls prey to the horrors of the old man's story. It is totally unjustifiable that he should "hath been stunned / And is of sense forlorn" (1.623) for the rest of his "sadder and . . . wiser" (1.624) life, when he has done absolutely nothing to deserve this lot. Of course, last but certainly not least, the Ancient Mariner is also doomed to "pass, like night, from land to land" (1.586) retelling, and reliving, his painful experiences to many other ill-fated souls. His act of killing the Albatross is sinful, even if committed in ignorance, but the penance remains savage in spite of all that he has suffered in atonement.

Although he begs and pleads for forgiveness and an end to his torment, the Mariner is forced to remember the loneliness and despair of his voyage: "So lonely 'twas, that God himself / Scarce seemed there to be" (11.599-600). Despite all that can be done in retribution, doom is mandatory and death, eminent in this universe in which God's mercy certainly does seem absent.

The ending's explicit moral of

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all (11.614-617)

is finally proven wrong when we look at the various fates that many characters have suffered at the hands of this supposedly beneficent and loving God. Without a doubt, the unaffected "[o]ld men, and babes, and loving friends / And youths and maidens gay" (11.608-609) will continue to worship this ideal and maintain the moral status quo perpetuated by the framework of the wedding. But the tale within the confines of this framework definitely does not correlate with or stay within the bounds of the framework. Instead, it challenges traditional values because as God-fearing and respectful as the two hundred men are, they die fruitlessly, and the Wedding-Guest is singled out for alienation and disillusionment for no reason whatsoever. Like the men, the Pilot's boy is a good Christian fellow who is faithfully obedient, but what he is given in return for his piety is madness. As for the Ancient Mariner, he is the very device that brings his world and the others' moralistic and pantheistic world together. Having sinned against the natural order, he pays dearly for his crime and will continue to do so, but at the same time, he seems to triumph over the harsh order that seeks to destroy him. In retelling his tale, the Ancient Mariner ostensibly challenges a shaky moral structure powerfully and dynamically.