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The Struggle to Communicate: Art, Embodiment, and Overcoming Isolation in the Text and Illustrations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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THE STRUGGLE TO COMMUNICATE: ART, EMBODIMENT, AND OVERCOMING
ISOLATION IN THE TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS OF SAMUEL TAYLOR
COLERIDGE'S *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER*

by

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Abstract

The following paper, at its heart, consists of an exploration of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* as well as of three sets of its illustrations by Gustave Doré, Hunt Emerson, and Ed Young. This task is approached with a few central questions in mind, questions drawn both from Coleridge's other philosophical works and, primarily, from the poem itself: is a work of art a "thought" or a "thing"? How do human beings, isolated in their physical bodies, communicate and connect? How might an exploration of the poem in conjunction with its illustrations – a layering of art upon art – shed some light on these questions? Throughout the paper I discuss the poem's historical reception, and its move from being considered nonsensical and unintelligible to its current status as a masterpiece; Coleridge's own concepts of art as a complex mediator between thought and thing, of the imagination as a living force, and of symbol as necessarily partaking, through its physical form, in the idea it represents; a brief overview of the three artists; the function of the poem's explanatory gloss as, primarily, Coleridge's evidence for the power of poetic communication over abstract, descriptive language, and of the futility of the human mind's attempts to impose non-existent patterns onto reality; the function of the poem's epigraph as an introduction into the unknowable realms of existence; and, finally, an in-depth analysis of the poem and, in conjunction, several of its illustrations, with an emphasis on the themes of isolation and communication, particularly as seen in the character of the Mariner, as well as upon the specific ways in which Coleridge and the artists themselves demonstrate the meaning-bearing power of art through their intentional use of rhythm, rhyme and diction, or space, line and color.

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Acknowledgments

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The Struggle to Communicate: Art, Embodiment, and Overcoming Isolation in Samuel Taylor

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been

Alone on a wide wide sea:

So lonely 'twas, that God himself

Scarce seemed there to be. (597-600)

Introduction

The tale of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a wild and strange one. When I first encountered

the poem during a literature survey course, I enjoyed the visceral, eerie experience of reading it

and resonated with what I felt to be its inexpressible depths of meaning. In spite of the power of

its very mysteriousness, in an academic context the poem's inscrutability seems to demand that it

be minutely taken apart, and though I stand by my initial hesitation towards its analysis –

analysis, at the time, I considered to be an act of destructive violence, in a way – I am here taking

up scalpel and magnifying glass in order to argue that the poem's power lies in its attempts to

express, through the subjective flexibility and physical rhythms of language, an experience that

transcends total expression. Furthermore, as the above lines depicting the human experience of

isolation indicate, I believe that we, as embodied and spiritual beings, must reach towards one

another with our physical hands in order for our souls to meet, must use the concrete, meaningful

tools of words and art in order for us not to be alone. These are concepts that show up explicitly

in Coleridge's own philosophical writings, and most centrally in the *Ancient Mariner* and its

gloss, as I will argue later. The connection between these ideas – art and communication as

physical yet transcendent, and the human need to escape isolation – will be explored throughout this project, through the lens of the *Ancient Mariner.*

These are slippery topics – how can one communicate about the very difficulty of communication, or about the experience of its absence? How can one express the inexpressible nature of art? And how can one tease out the secrets of a poem that seems to elude perfect explanation, whose very power lies in this fact? These questions are central to an understanding of Coleridge as a poet and a philosopher, and to an understanding of his most well-known, fantastical and meaningful work. I will attempt to discuss them through a close reading of the poem itself, and through an analysis of some of its illustrations, as it is my theory that examining a visual artist's interactive, communicative response to the poem will shed some light on its nature and meaning, and, more generally, on the function and nature of art itself. However, these are still fair questions, and I ask only that my readers keep them in mind, and so bear with me, as I tackle this strange, cumbersome, and (I believe) necessary task, through my exploration of the concrete example of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and its illustrations.

An Unintelligible Beauty

Since its original publication in 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (or of the *Ancyent Marinere,* as it was first titled) has puzzled critics and readers alike. General incomprehension has often been mingled with both frustration and a vague sense of awe – Robert Southey, one of the poem's earliest critics, famously declared, "Many of the stanzas are laboriously beautiful; but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible… We do not sufficiently understand the story to analyse it" (*Critical Heritage,* 53). Charles Burney described it as "the strangest story of cock and bull that we ever saw on paper," but went on to assert that

"though it seems a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence… there are in it poetical touches of an exquisite kind" (*CH,* 56). Such mixed responses reflect the strange power of the poem. It is at once almost comically ambiguous and fantastical, but also captivating and meaningful, causing readers to question the relationship between art and meaning in a new way, as will be discussed throughout this paper.

The poem's archaic language, its tale of seemingly arbitrary cause and disproportionate effect, and its horrific and fantastical subject matter together result in a work that can be, at first glance, incoherent and overwhelming. Coleridge edited and republished the *Ancient Mariner* in 1817, this time with an explanatory gloss, or annotations in the margins, running throughout the poem. It can be assumed that the changes – at least, the removal of some of the archaic spellings – were made, in part, in response to the charges of unintelligibility, but more significant were the major edits and additions to the text, which, as the Norton introduction to the poem puts it, transformed the work "from one that emphasized crime, punishment, and supernatural terror… to one that, in light of the epigraph from Burnet and the gloss, speculates on a spiritual and moral universe" (56). This change is significant in light of my thesis, as it transforms what could have been a black-and-white tale into something more subtle, speculative and meaningful, and something that dares to peer into the elusive world of the heart and soul, rather than remaining exclusively in the realms of terror and visceral fantasy.

Decades later, in 1875, the renowned engraver Gustave Doré produced his illustrations of the *Ancient Mariner*, which slowly grew in popularity and are now those iconically associated with the poem (Soubigou). Today the poem is acknowledged to be a classic and a masterpiece, and there is a massive amount of criticism and scholarship dedicated to attempting the

interpretation of the elusive text.[1] However, aside from the significant relationship between Doré's engravings and the *Ancient Mariner,* little critical attention has been given to the different illustrations of the poem throughout its history. Given its vivid imagery and fantastical subject matter, there has been no shortage of artists interested in illustrating the work, and so interpreting it through their unique responses to and representations of the same. However, the many layers of the strange, ambiguous poem, and the difficulty critics throughout its history have had in interpreting it, may have presented a challenge for these artists as they decided how best to respond to and "translate" the work from words to visual art. As Millicent Rose put it in her introduction to the poem as illustrated by Gustave Doré, its "virtues – its subtle music, psychological depths, its sense of growing horror – are not those that ordinarily lend themselves to pictorial representation" (v).

I would argue that the poem, in all its strangeness, is already an example of an artist (Coleridge, as a poet) attempting to express inexpressible ideas and experiences in the concrete form of words. Human communication itself is, by nature, incarnational, as we attempt to transfer our non-physical thoughts and feelings into physical words or actions – and by this, I mean that words literally consist of sound and breath and cadence, or a shape on a page. Therefore, examining the way in which illustrators of the poem have attempted to transform the

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[1] Another notable contemporary response is Charles Lamb's defense of the poem to Robert Southey, which can be found in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*. Of modern critics, perhaps the most influential interpretative work is Robert Penn Warren's ground-breaking "A Poem of Pure Imagination," which is included in the Norton *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose.* Some other significant critical responses to the poem are discussed in the body of this project.

written work into visual art involves discussion of how artists in general attempt to best realize ideas and experiences that seem unquantifiable. This discussion, I would argue, is related to the paradoxical, dualistic nature of humans as transcendent (spiritually interconnected) and embodied (physically isolated) beings, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* which involves both metaphysical and grittily physical subject matter, lends itself well to such an exploration. The questions I intend to explore are as follows: What do Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and its illustrations contribute to the conversation surrounding the function of an artist as one who, through the music of language or the visual symbolism of art, attempts to give physical form to the non-physical aspects of human experience, and so create connection? How does Coleridge approach this through the poem as well as the gloss? How do individual artists – Gustave Doré, Ed Young, and Hunt Emerson – respond to and interpret the work, and to what effect? The core themes running through this exploration, which have their source in Coleridge's own philosophy and poetry, will be such: that Coleridge's poem and its illustrations, in fantastically depicting one man's intense experience of isolation, speak to the reality of the difficulty and necessity of communication and connection, which is closely linked to the complex, dually physical and spiritual nature and experience of humankind; and that art, as an equally complex physical and non-physical, "symbolic" entity, plays an essential role in this communication of meaning and the creation of human connection.

Coleridge's Philosophies of Imagination, Art, and Meaning

Coleridge's own opinions and philosophies regarding the nature of art, language, and the imagination are critical in this discussion, and luckily such a prolific and comprehensive writer could not fail to supply readers with a wealth of materials that touch on the subjects involved.

One aspect of his ideas regarding art, and a rather simple one, coincides with the view of art that this project, in part, is exploring. Morton Paley, who investigates Coleridge's own experience of and writings about art in his book, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts,* writes of Coleridge's idea of art, "The artist attempts through whatever medium—paint, stone, words—to transfer a mental image, whether of a real person or an imagined scene—to the mind of the viewer or reader," and then quotes from page 4397 of the third volume of Coleridge's notebooks as collected and edited by Kathleen Coburn: "'Art itself,' Coleridge wrote, 'might be defined, as of a middle nature between Thought and Thing'" (Paley, 219-20). Though this may seem a modest enough observation, it is crucial in that it sheds light on Coleridge's own attitude towards his poetry, particularly the *Ancient Mariner*, its gloss, and the idea of illustrating the text. Art, in a sense, is the mediator between inner and outer realities, and as such has a unique function and nature. It is endowed with both physical and transcendent elements as not quite a thing and not quite a thought, and yet it is necessary in transferring thought to thing and back again to thought, the only physical intermediate between the mind of the creator and the mind of the reader, hearer or viewer, yet also more than a simple physical passageway between minds. A poem or a work of art, it could be argued, though existing as an object, is not an object in the same way a chair or rock is an object; it acts, in its physical existence, as a sign, present yet pointing to and somehow containing something beyond itself. The *Ancient Mariner* is an ambiguous species, neither a direct transmission of thought nor an isolated object, in Coleridge's mind; it imparts meaning in a strange and layered way that is compounded by its fantastical nature, to the frustration of uncomprehending critics. Given this, a poem is already complex in nature as such an intermediate, and so illustrations *could* be seen as simply complicating things by building themselves onto this pre-existing process.

Before discussing the visual representations of the poem, however, it is interesting to note that Coleridge seemed at times, as seen in his notebooks, to view the visual arts as in some ways inferior to poetry. At least, he considered visual art to be less universal than the arts of language and story, partially because the enjoyment of art had been for so long confined as a privilege of the rich; also, as Carl Woodring puts it in "What Coleridge Thought of Pictures," drawing from various statements found in Coleridge's notebooks, while a "poem can exist without a page… the visual arts are unalterably physical in their dress" (99). This very physical nature not only makes visual art more perishable, but also, often, more limited to the external, surface-level details necessary for visual depiction. This limitation of the visual arts, as Coleridge described it, is also made clear in his reaction to David Scott's illustrations of the *Ancient Mariner.* He was upset at the artist's inaccurate depiction of the Mariner as an old man, and, as the artist's younger brother described it, responded by breaking poetry into two types – descriptive (about the outward nature of things) and imaginative (about the things of the mind) – and asserted that only the former should ever be illustrated, as an attempt at the latter could only be inadequate (Paley, 196). Given Coleridge's own description of his poem as a work of "pure imagination" (*Table Talk*, 87), it would not be unreasonable to assume that Coleridge would have found most illustrations of the poem unsuccessful, or at least always partially so, because the nature of the visual arts seems often to demand a delineation of detail, while poetry is more free to leave concrete details to the imagination. Rephrasing this into Coleridge's language regarding art as midway between thought and thing, it could be said that the visual representation can lock an image too strongly into its "thingness," while the less definitive medium of words more easily maintains a flexible duality.

However, it is worthwhile to examine Coleridge's own categorization of poetry as

"descriptive" versus "imaginative" more closely, before dismissing all visual art as inadequate. We have little information regarding his thoughts on this delineation, aside from the conversation mentioned above (though his distinction between the imagination and the fancy, which will be discussed more later, is enlightening); however, it seems reasonable to argue that, if poetry can be categorized as either concerned with the depiction of only external, physical realities or of internal, non-physical truths, the same could be said of visual art. Of course, we have considered Coleridge's own objections to visual art's ability to accomplish the latter, given its inescapably descriptive, physical nature; yet visual art is able to accomplish depths of meaning in much the same way as written art. Where poetry imparts transcendent meaning through the form and music of language, rather than just the abstract or literal meanings of words, visual art relies on form as well – on color, shade, line, the very physical medium that Coleridge dismisses as limiting – to impart meaning beyond whatever may be depicted. Any artist approaching Coleridge's masterpiece intent upon perfectly translating the external, visual aspects of the poem would produce something laughable and simplistic – in fact, one of the artists who will be discussed later, Hunt Emerson, often does just this for comedic effect. Yet visual art, though limited by its physical nature, need not be merely descriptive and literal; through its physical components, like poetry, it can transcend simple depiction and participate in the very meaning that it expresses. An "imaginative" work of visual art, using Coleridge's definition, would be about internal things rather than external; and in much the same way that poetry accomplishes this through diction and the rhythms of language, an imaginative illustration can communicate meaning through evocative colors, a use of line and perspective, and through symbol, among other things, in order to express something far beyond simple external description.

  This discussion of the difference between descriptive and imaginative art connects to the

two forces Coleridge spent so much time differentiating in his work – the fancy and the imagination. As he describes it in chapter 13 of his *Biographia Literaria,* the imagination is living and active, vital, to some extent independent of objects, and stems from the powers of divine creation, while the fancy just rearranges dead objects, passively and mechanically (*Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 488-489). A visual artist or a poet alike, if working with the fancy alone, would create something cold, shallow, and static. However, any work of the imagination, whether it be written or visual, is somehow able to transcend the "objects" with which it works, and to create something that is alive – or, as Coleridge would put it, *real*. This is a key way of thinking of true art – as neither pure thought nor simple thing, it could be viewed as animated, taking on life and reality beyond its simple physical parts. Again, a work of the imagination is not, as we discussed earlier, a mere thing, a dead dilution of the creator's thought; it is somehow both thought and thing, expressing and containing meaning in its own embodied, real way. This relates well to Coleridge's differentiation between allegory and symbol; as he argues in *The Statesman's Manual,* symbol "always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible" (*Inquiring Spirit,* 104). As Nicholas Halmi puts it, "only when [Coleridge] began to assert that the symbol is *part* of what it represents did he also begin to differentiate it from allegory" (*Coleridge's Poetry and Prose,* 347). In this way, works of art are themselves, as a whole, symbols. Their very physicality is involved in – is a part of – meaning-making. As I have hinted earlier, I believe this aspect of the nature of art – and, indeed of human communication in general, for any communication is necessarily physical – is essential in its connection to human identity as both physical and transcendent.

Returning to the idea of translations, I would argue that the limited nature of visual art only applies if illustrators are attempting to perfectly convey the exact meaning or specific

details of the poem, a mission set up for failure. However, if the illustrations are created imaginatively and actively, rather than descriptively, and viewed either as complementary to the poem or as stand-alone works attempting to do visually what Coleridge has accomplished with words, rather than as direct copies or all-encompassing representations, they can be powerful and effective. Thinking of the process as simple dilution diminishes the power and nature of art; though art is not a direct distillation of thought, it is also much more than a simple "thing." The *forms* of the works themselves contain meaning, and make them more than diluted versions of the ideal in the artist's head. Illustrations of the poem, then, are not necessarily less powerful for being more distanced from Coleridge's mind than the poem itself; if they are successful works of art, they take on new meanings and power all their own.

I will keep all these complex factors in mind when I examine the work of three artists who applied themselves to responding to and interpreting the *Ancient Mariner* visually, evaluating their success and the new light they may shed on Coleridge's wild and philosophical work of pure imagination. Before heading into an analysis of the *Ancient Mariner* and its illustrations, I find it necessary to give a brief overview of these three visual artists we will be considering as we explore the nature of art and its relationship to communication, isolation, and the duality of human nature through our examination of the poem – their general backgrounds and general approaches will be discussed, as naturally these will feed into the ways they relate to the poem and to Coleridge's definitions of imaginative art, symbol, and so on. These artists are Gustave Doré, Hunt Emerson, and Ed Young.

The Artists

The first and most iconic artist to consider is Gustave Doré, whose engravings have become

those most traditionally associated with the work. Doré "contributed to a great extent to [the] rediscovery" of Coleridge's work when he published his engravings of the poem in 1875 (Soubigou). As Renee Riese Hubert writes in "The Ancient Mariner's Graphic Voyage through Mimesis and Metaphor," multiple critical interpretations of the text were circulating by this time; therefore, in Hubert's view, Doré's style of realism, which he describes as "painstakingly translating the verbal into the visual" in a way that is stylistically and interpretatively straightforward, "could not possibly make visible the full potential of the poem and account for the ambiguities" (81). On the other hand, Martin Gardner, whose American edition of the poem and engravings was published during the "post-war revival" of Doré's work, argued that Coleridge's fantastical tale *required* "realism" for its illustrations. Grant Scott, most notably, wrote a quasi-defense of Doré's illustrations, partially in response to Hubert's criticisms, in which he argues that the illustrations hold much more depth than his critics think. He writes that the "graphic artist's skill remains subordinate to the poet's because it endeavors to compress and clarify the text… the illustrator is seen as translating the complexity of the written word into the lucid, immediately apprehensible meaning of the image" (2). He believes this definition to be insufficient, as do I. Although much of his preceding argument is linked to pointing out the presence of homoeroticism in Doré's engravings of the poem, which he believes complicated the contemporary interpretations of the poem as a Christian parable of fall and redemption, and which is a focus I find too Freudian to completely agree with, I appreciate this perspective. Illustrators are much more than translators; they cannot be expected to perfectly reflect the text, as they bring their own human imaginations and responses to it (as it should be). It is therefore not necessarily a failure that Doré's engravings "seemed to fail to respect the inner rhythm of the poem and split the visual from the verbal," as Soubigou puts it; he meant, after all, for them to be

considered as separate entities, and they were separated from the poem itself in the original folio edition.

Having looked over a few critical responses to Doré's engravings, then, we must of course make sure to describe his general style and approach. As mentioned above, Doré's work does include an incredible attention to detail that was rather characteristic of the time. His focus, which is so different, as we will see, from that of Ed Young's, is on the human face and body, as often as this is possible; and whether this is seen in his depiction of Death and Life-in-Death playing dice, or dead sailors heaped together, or the Mariner sitting forlorn and alone on the ship with the enormous albatross bowing him forward, he portrays each character with great expression, motion and drama. His depiction of the wild natural environment, too, is breathtaking. Overall his style is defined by a penchant for drama, and his use of dark, light, and strong lines encourage this overall effect. Occasionally this detailed and dramatic style does fail to either complement or reflect Coleridge's poetry, or Doré limits himself too much to the depiction of the poem's external realities – truly falling into the category of descriptive art in his attempts to capture the poem through a detailed depiction of a landscape, or a dramatic pose – yet his representation of the work still has much to offer.

Our next artist is the contemporary children's book illustrator Ed Young, who is probably the least familiar to the average reader of poetry; I can find very little about his life aside from the blurb on the dustcover of his 1992 illustrated edition of the *Ancient Mariner,* which describes him as a Chinese-born American and a prolific, award-winning children's book illustrator. His webpage also includes these thoughts on illustration as an art form: "A Chinese painting is often accompanied by words… They are complementary. There are things that words do that pictures never can, and likewise, there are images that words can never describe" ("About Ed"). This

perspective seems to starkly contrast with Doré, who, as described above, would have preferred to have his rendition of the *Ancient Mariner* considered as self-sufficient and complete, independent from the poem. Keeping Young's professed model of illustration in mind, then – one in which words and pictures must collaborate, interdependently filling in the gaps left by the other – is illuminating in examining his artistic choices throughout his depiction of the poem. His admission of the failures of both visual art and words is interesting, and perhaps more realistic than Doré's expectations, and his emphasis on the connection between word and picture implies that he may, as an artist, be more open to use of form necessary for a truly imaginative work of art.

Young's illustrations are split into two styles. First, there are small charcoal sketches, which tend to be placed directly on the same page as the physical words of the poem. These little sketches portray such details as the lighthouse, the silhouettes of the Mariner and the three wedding guests, and a close-up of the dead albatross, all composed of rough, dark lines, and often somewhat blurred or smudged. The second group of Young's illustrations are done in pastel. (To clarify, these two categories are not separated in the text – illustrations of both types are interspersed throughout.) These, which are often seascapes and involve a strong use of thematic colors and empty space, tend to fill an entire page adjacent to a page of text, or to take up a full two-page spread. Young rarely portrays people in much detail, or really anything in detail at all – his focus seems to be on creating an emotional response in his readers, and he accomplishes this through moody colors, and through blurred, often nearly indistinct illustrations which influence the readers as they take in the strange story, but also leave much up to the subjective imagination. This connects perfectly to what we have described as an imaginative illustration, using Coleridge's definition – one that is living, and depends on connection with a

viewer for the creation of meaning. In this way, I would argue, Young's illustrations are the most effective when considered as complementary to the poem, particularly in regards to the necessity of intimate interaction between the work and the individual imagination.

Hunt Emerson, our third and final illustrator, is perhaps equal to Young in obscurity (at least, both artists' names are equally unfamiliar in academic circles) – and his status as a comic artist makes his approach to the poem the most unorthodox. As Frank Pointner and Sandra Boschenhoff put it in their article for the *CEA Critic*, "Classics Emulated: Comic Adaptations of Literary Texts," Emerson's primary way of engaging with the poem is to translate "Coleridge's metaphors, similes, and onomatopoetic devices into pictures, thus reducing them into absurdity" (102). In this way, they argue, Emerson makes what has historically been considered a rather inaccessible, difficult poem accessible and entertaining to readers who would otherwise, as Gilbert Shelton jokes in his introduction to Emerson's *Rime,* find it "lacking in humor." Emerson "willingly accepts [the] incongruency between verbal allegory and pictorial rendition in order to turn Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' into a comic in the etymological sense, thus making a virtue out of necessity" (Pointner, 105). However, Emerson's humorous approach to the poem should by no means cause it to be dismissed from any sort of critical discussion, nor should his work be ignored as "not serious art." In fact, his use of deliberate misunderstanding and literal interpretation is quite reminiscent of the points at which Coleridge's gloss (pointedly) fails, as we will discuss later, and so its consideration is enlightening.

As a comic, the words are necessarily incorporated into the illustrations of the work – the verbal is embedded in the visual – and the story is chopped up into pieces. Emerson has to show moment after moment while progressing through the text, rather than picking the most potent or visually dynamics bits like Young and Doré can. He also, by necessity, puts the marginal notes

of the gloss at the chapter heads of each section. In spite of an apparent complete lack of

seriousness, his rendition of the poem does include moments of interesting interpretative power;

for example, he chooses to illustrate the ending platitude by showing the Mariner speaking them

to the Wedding Guest dramatically, almost doing an interpretative dance along with them, before

tipping his cap and asking for money. Aside from brief moments like this, he focuses on

portraying the poem's external, or "descriptive," factors; in this way, much of his humor stems

from an acknowledgment, perhaps, of visual art's inability to perfectly translate or express

internal, non-physical layers. In short, he, just as, I will argue, Coleridge does through the gloss,

pokes fun at descriptive mediums that attempt to convey truth and meaning through a fancy-

based rearrangement of static, meaningless externalities.

Next we will examine *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* itself, considering specific

illustrations and engaging with various critics when relevant. As I proceed through the poem, my

close reading will be focused on the 1834 version of the text, which includes Coleridge's gloss,

and is commonly accepted as the authoritative or final text. In fact, it is necessary, before diving

in to the poem, to consider the most obvious change that occurred between the original 1798 and

the authoritative 1834 editions: the addition of the gloss.

The Gloss

A discussion of the gloss is pertinent to this paper due to its professed function as descriptive and

explanatory. Although the true purpose and nature of the gloss has been debated, as I will discuss

more soon, at face value it seems intended to be an elucidation of the ambiguous poem – in this

way, it tips itself straight into the descriptive, flat literalism that illustrations inevitably find

themselves in danger of falling into. The voice of the scholar often lectures and clarifies the

poem into simplistic dullness, and so proves the insufficiency of the human mind that can only communicate through literal explanation and superficial description.

To expand on that idea: the gloss, like the poem itself, has presented a substantial problem for critics. In its very nature as a gloss, it presumably *ought* to function as a more straightforward explanation of the action of the poem. However, as many scholars have noted, not only does such summarizing seem to diminish or domesticate the power and mystery of the poem, but the gloss does not even stick to this task, sometimes departing from the immediate action and adding in poetic asides or additional ideas and factors to the text. One such instance is found accompanying lines 131-34 in Coleridge's humorously jarring note about spirits, "concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted." His gloss to lines 263-66, as well, departs from immediate explanation to a beautiful aside about the moon and stars in the sky, "which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival." At this point, the assumed character of the scholar writing the gloss falls away, and the abstract, explanatory language yields to the metaphor and symbolism of the poet. This moment will be explored more as we make our way through the poem; for now, it is sufficient to note that Coleridge's gloss does not stay within the bounds of elucidation.

Whatever Coleridge may have intended the gloss to do, it simply does not seem to live up to the role of pure explanation and summary. As I see it – and this, again, will be discussed more as we proceed through the poem – the gloss functions, in part, to poke fun at the scholars and academics approaching the poem with hopes of fitting it into a simple pattern, of making it "make sense." As Patrick Kelly puts it, "The very fact that we often find the glossator forcing the poem into the pattern of a moral lesson suggests that Coleridge is using the gloss to convey the

inadequacies of a strictly moral approach to the poem" (297). This is reminiscent of Coleridge's

famous conversation with Mrs. Barbauld, who complained that the poem had no moral and

followed no pattern; to which Coleridge replied, that its "chief fault… was the obtrusion of the

moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle of cause of action in a work of such pure

imagination" (*Table Talk,* 87). Given that this was Coleridge's own opinion, it seems necessary

not to take the gloss at face value alone. As Frances Ferguson writes, if the gloss is meant to be a

scholar's interpretative salvation, it "provides a strange kind of unity and clarity" (252). She goes

on to say that "both the Gloss and the bulk of critical opinion of the poem may well be

editorializing, in that they mold contradictory evidences into a cause-and-effect pattern that the

main text never quite offers," in a way similar, in my mind and to Ferguson, to Biblical

commentaries (253). So, "Coleridge's Gloss to the 'Rime' recalls not merely the archetypal

glosses – those in the margins of early printed editions of the Bible; it also raises the question of

the ways in which such glosses and the primer tradition made the Bible more accessible and

comprehensible while also domesticating that main text," a danger which, again, could be

applied to necessarily concrete illustrations (256). This is a relevant speculation when applied to

the parts of the poem's gloss in which Coleridge lays out overt moral judgments, or explains

motives that cannot be seen in the text itself, as in the explicitly moralistic gloss to lines 79-82,

"The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen." Words like

"inhospitably" and "pious" seem inappropriately pointed when laid next to the fantastical story. I

would argue that this sharp contrast is intentional (though, alternatively, it could be simply

Coleridge's own ambivalence breaking through into an attempt to describe and explain), and that

the gloss is pointing to the intellectual danger of limiting a work of art by trying to force it into

an obvious and objectively meaningful pattern, rather than allowing it to remain in the

subjectivity that is so much more true to ambiguous human experience.

However, as Jerome McGann points out, neither taking the gloss at face value nor dismissing it as a bad joke does it justice (38). He argues that another virtue of the gloss, drawing on Coleridge's writings concerning Biblical interpretation, is that it allows for a multiplicity of interpretations by supplying more than one point of view within the context of the poem (41). Though I agree with this theory in that it supports the idea of the text's inherent flexibility of meaning, I would add that, by including multiple points of view in the work, Coleridge was not ascribing equal value to each of them; I am of the opinion that the juxtaposition between poet and glossator was intended to fall flat at points, pointing to the insufficiency of explanatory abstraction, and that the two voices are meant to be taken as in dialogue with one another, because understanding the gloss as a summary of the poem would prove an incomplete and misleading reading of the text.

The Epigraph

Turning now to the poem, the first chronological difference to be found between the original and the authoritative versions is in the epigraph of the latter. Originally, the poem was prefaced by an "Argument," which provided a simple and vague sketch of the action of the poem to come. By the 1834 version, this "Argument" had been replaced by an epigraph in Latin, taken, with some variation, from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*. Burnet, a 17th century cleric and scientist, is best known for his *Sacred Theory of the Earth,* in which he theorizes on how the Flood caused the mountains to arise, as well as for inciting controversy by suggesting, in the work from which this epigraph comes, that the story of the Fall of Man should be understood as allegory ("Thomas Burnet"). This context informs us as readers, already, that we are in the

context of the relationship between stories, or symbols, and ultimate truth. The specific passage

that Coleridge quotes, when translated, begins, "I readily believe that there are more invisible

than visible Natures in the Universe," and goes on to discuss the unknowability of these invisible

Natures, asserting that the "human mind has always desired the knowledge of these things, but

never attained it… it is helpful sometimes to contemplate… the image of the greater and better

world… But at the same time we must be watchful for the truth" (*Poetry and Prose,* 59). The

intentional addition of this epigraph is telling regarding the theme and focus of Coleridge's

poem, and is also very relevant to the theme of this paper. Here, in his very introduction,

Coleridge addresses the paradoxical nature of reality as composed of both visible, physical

entities and invisible, non-physical entities, as well as the tension between "contemplating" the

invisible while also attempting to remain grounded in truth and physical realities. We as readers

find ourselves pushed directly into the context of spirit and body, of unknowable, and thus

inexpressible, entities and ideas.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

The poem opens with two people coming into contact with one another; Coleridge chooses to

have the Mariner tell his story within the context of another, and it is one of encounter.

> It is an ancient Mariner,
>
> And he stoppeth one of three.
>
> "By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
>
> Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?" (1-4)

Rather than having the Mariner simply address the reader, we are first introduced to the Wedding

Guest, who is chosen from a group of three in what Ferguson describes as "probably the most

arbitrary event in a poem filled with arbitrary events" (257) (though as we will see later, to the

Mariner the encounter is anything but arbitrary), apprehended in the middle of a busy day and

somehow drawn into the Mariner's eerie tale. Thus, from the very beginning of the poem, we are

in the context of the attempts that humans make to communicate. In fact, with the very first

jarring word, "it," the Mariner is introduced as an entity that is, perhaps because of his isolation,

not even considered fully human, which implies that the relational nature of humankind is

integral to human identity. The Mariner, then, coming from this isolated position of a

dehumanized "other" figure, has a story to tell – a story he *needs* to tell, a connection he needs to

make and by consequence momentarily erase his own isolation – and, as is indicated later in

lines 588-90, somehow mysteriously knows that it is the Wedding Guest who must hear it; the

Wedding Guest "cannot choose but hear" (38). The poem, then, is framed by the situation of one

lone human trying with all his might to impart the meaning of his experience – an experience so

strange that its depths are hardly expressible, and ultimately a story of the utter isolation of a

human soul – to another human through simple, physical words, through physically holding on to

him (9). All of this is found in Coleridge's simple choice to have the tortured, isolated Mariner

tell his story to the Wedding Guest, an everyday man concerned with everyday, external and

social life, while the meaning of the story, and the success of its communication – the success of

the Mariner's attempt to form a connection with another person using physical, limited yet

transcendent words – is yet to be determined. On top of all of this, we as readers are literally

being brought into an encounter with the poem as well, and Coleridge as an author is seeking to

create a connection with us just as the Mariner attempts to form a connection with the Guest.

 Given this initial framework of one human attempting to impart meaning to another, it is

interesting to examine a couple of our artists' renditions of the scene, also paying attention to

Figure 1: Doré, The Mariner and the Wedding Guest, pg. 3

whether they successfully create an encounter and connection for the viewers as well. Both Doré

and Emerson pick up on an aspect that has not yet been discussed – the resistance of the

Wedding Guest, which arguably has to do with the fear of connection that sometimes goes

paradoxically hand in hand with the fear of isolation. In Doré's engraving (see Fig. 1), the wild-

eyed Mariner has his hand firmly on the Guest's shoulder; the Guest's eyes are locked with his,

but he appears to be stepping backwards, and one of his companions casts a concerned glance

back while running up a flight of stairs into a dark, dense crowd. The Mariner is an "other"

figure in this scene, reaching out desperately in his attempt to make a connection; his very

Figure 2: Emerson, The Mariner and the Wedding Guest, pg. 5

desperation is unnerving to the Guest, and though a connection is formed between the two of

them, it is one that temporarily cuts the Guest off from the rest of the community. Similarly,

Emerson's first panels (see Fig. 2) depict the three wedding guests walking along in cheerful

conversation before the Mariner, his arms humorously upraised, leaps out from behind a rock,

causing them all to jump with fright. Although the comic inevitably fails to capture the uncanny

effect of the moment as captured by the poem, again, the Mariner's very isolation, and the

intensity of his tale, causes him to be cast as a frightening figure – and again, the Guest is

abandoned by his fellows when he finds himself drawn into the story. In a sense, it is the Guest's

own fear of isolation that makes him wary of alleviating that of the Mariner. Altogether, both

artists successfully, though very differently, convey aspects of the beginning of the poem that are

true to what Coleridge is doing – through a portrayal of the sudden intensity of the encounter

between the Mariner and the Guest, they create the connection necessary for viewers to be

brought into the story and experience.

The Mariner then begins his story by describing and focusing on the physical journey and

scenery. In fact, for much of the poem this is, superficially, where we stay – as he describes the

sun (25-28) or the ice (51-62), so he describes his external action of killing the Albatross (81-82),

with little or no narration of the internal and spiritual realities of the tale. This sensory,

externally-focused nature seems almost to mimic visual art, and is similar in that it could cause

the poem to be dismissed as itself merely descriptive; this, of course, would be foolish. Such,

often, is the nature of *imaginative* art and poetry; through a depiction of external realities, the

artist subtly conveys volumes about internal realities. Art does not succeed through dense

language and abstractions – which, occasionally, is what the gloss seems to attempt – but

through using metaphor and symbol and analogy, through using the physical mediums of paint or

written words themselves. In this way, mere physicality can be transcended, and rather than

being limiting becomes more meaningful, through its very concreteness, than any abstraction

could. Regarding poetry, we can take, for example, Coleridge's description of the ship

embarking in this section: "Merrily did we drop / Below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the

lighthouse top" (22-24). He is literally describing the ship's movement out of the harbor.

However, his choice of words conveys much more that – the ship is not simply moving away but

"dropping below," implying a descent into another world of sorts, and describing this in relation

to the kirk, which is the center of a community, and then the lighthouse, which is the last point of

contact with that community, re-enforces the feeling that the Mariner and the rest of the crew are

moving into strange, almost inhuman realms. This, I would argue, is the power of art – however

hard it may seem to communicate, even the simplest or (seemingly) merely descriptive language

can convey depths of meaning.

Of course, this is not to say that such meaning is always obvious, or at all objective. As

mentioned earlier, when the Mariner confesses to killing the Albatross in this section, it is in the

plainest of terms – "With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross" (81-2). He provides no

explanation for this action; it seems to be arbitrary and unmotivated. Though the gloss, as the

voice of abstraction and forced, objective patterns, moralizes by attaching words like

"inhospitably" and "pious," it provides no real explanation either; it simply jars us further. This single action of the poem has baffled critics since the poem's first publication, and its very mysteriousness may be responsible for allowing the incredible diversity of interpretations of the poem that have arisen, such as Christopher Stokes' speculation that the killing of the Albatross portrays the irrationality of the Christian doctrine of original sin, among many others. The ambiguous nature of the poem, which can so frustrate critics, I would argue, is part of its virtue – it allows for an incredible multiplicity of interpretations, but also contains inherent meaning, though this meaning may be more an *experience* than Coleridge's objective underlying intentions. Critics may construct all the interpretations they wish, and generally will be able to argue for them all; yet this does not diminish the power of the story, such as the pathos of the Mariner's killing of the Albatross, as it stands within the context of the poem. This, sometimes, is what art and communication are – expressions of something undefinable, to be *experienced* and felt as meaningful though the meaning may be untranslatable. This idea of experience is central, and I would argue that the meaning of this poem lies more in an experience – particularly the experience of isolation, which we will continue to discuss – than any abstract idea.

As the most central action of the plot, yet one described so simply, it is unsurprising that the moment of the Albatross's murder resulted in very different depictions by our three artists. Emerson depicts the Mariner almost as a grinning schoolboy, arbitrarily shooting at the Albatross with harmless toy arrows in a state of mischievous glee, a depiction that was probably chosen for its humor, but also stresses the meaningless violence of the Mariner (and perhaps humanity in general). Both Doré and Young, on the other hand, do not choose to portray the Mariner's part in the deed much at all. Doré's engraving (Fig. 3) shows the Albatross flying, wings majestically outstretched and its head turned innocently away over a dreary background of ice, while the

Figure 3: Doré, The Shooting of the Albatross, pg. 17

arrow flies directly at its heart. We as viewers float nearby, creating the sense that we are

helpless observers witnessing a tragedy. Young depicts the scene in two rough charcoal sketches

(Fig. 4); the first shows the faceless Mariner from the back, aiming his crossbow parallel with the

tall mast, at the top of which sits the relaxed bird, again looking innocently in the other direction,

while the second sketch, which is very dark and bleeds out onto the page, shows the dead

Albatross, its beak open and its wings held tightly against its body. Once again, the sensation

created for viewers is one of helplessness and tragedy. Both Doré and Young, then, seem to

emphasize the innocence and beauty of the victim, rather than the arbitrary evil of the Mariner;

through the simple choices of detail and perspective, viewers encounter the same resonance in

these illustrations as readers do in the poem.

The first detail of interest in Part II is found in the reaction of the Mariner's companions
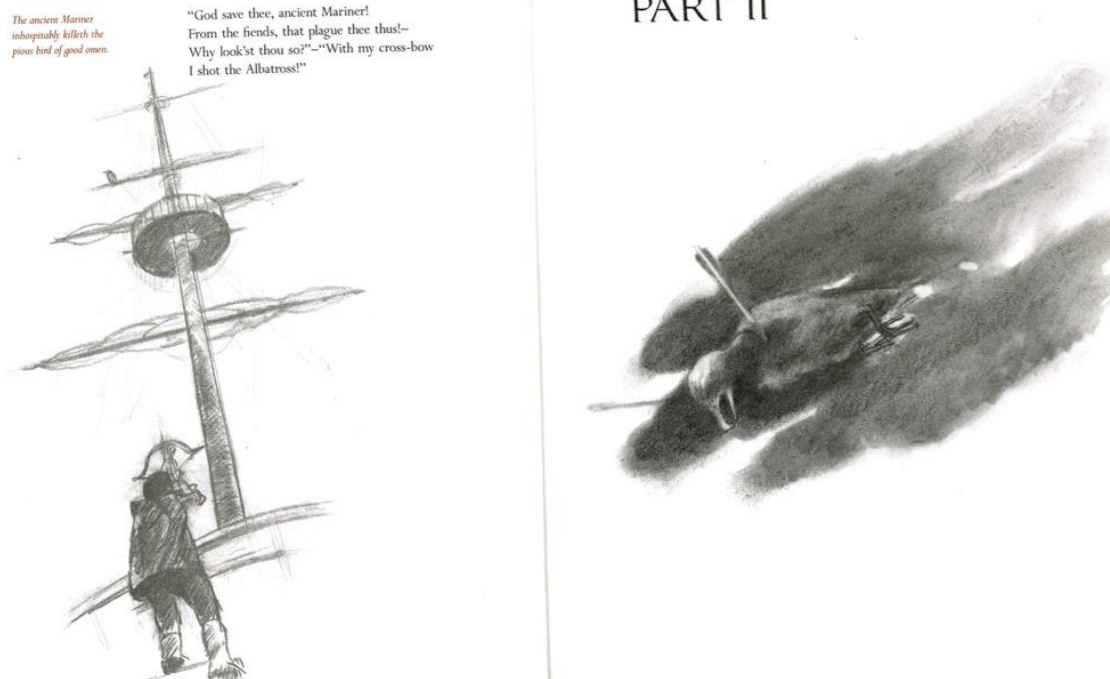
Figure 4: Young, The Shooting of the Albatross, pgs. 7-8

to his killing of the Albatross. Initially they scold him for doing "a hellish thing" (91) to the bird they perceive to have been lucky; however, when the fog disappears, they decide that the Albatross was in fact a bringer of bad luck, and justify his action. I believe this to be significant, and deliberately done by Coleridge; through the flip-flopping of the crew, he again points to the way that humans are able to make any situation or work fit their own interpretation. Within the context of the poem, we have no indication that the Albatross was anything more than a bird; at least initially, the weather seems to function simply as weather, unaffected by the Albatross's presence or demise, yet the sailors' construct an understanding of the bird that moves drastically between extremes depending on the connections of cause and effect they draw between its situation and theirs. Humans will see patterns anywhere.

However, the ship does suddenly become becalmed, and the crewmembers find themselves stranded in a "silent sea," a simple description that I find compelling (106). The gentle alliteration of this phrase is an excellent example of the music of the poem, and the way
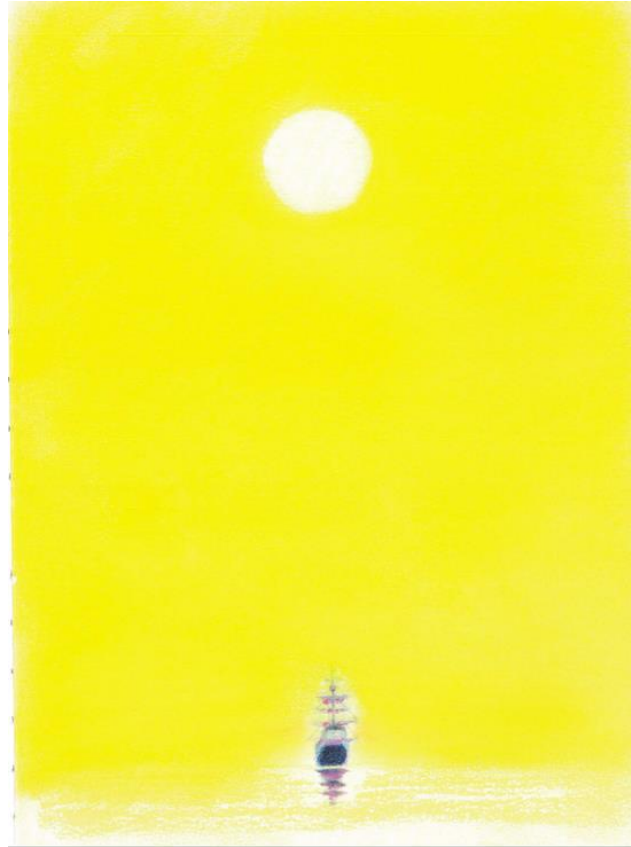
Figure 5: Young, The Silent Sea, pg. 10

that the language actually embodies and expresses the meaning the words define. In the

Mariner's words, the sailors feel compelled to speak "only to break / The silence of the sea!"

(109-110). Is this truly, as the gloss claims, the Albatross's vengeance? Whether it is or not, the

emphasis on silence and words is interesting here, as it portrays, yet again, humanity's sort of

inner compulsion to communicate, to break the silence, to transmit and create meaning into that

silence, which seems, at least in this scene, to be a sort of disconnection and isolation, in which

each man is stranded and alone in the silence until one or the other opens his mouth in order to

physically reach out and reconnect to the people around him.

Young's depiction of this image of this "silent sea" (Fig. 5) is particularly successful in

its visual reflection of Coleridge's simple yet powerful phrase. If Coleridge takes his readers

beyond the "mere" words through the rhyme and alliteration of the lines – "We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea" (105-106) – Young accomplishes much the same effect through his use of space and color. His page depicting the scene is almost entirely filled by a buttery yellow sky. Towards the bottom the yellow fades and blurs slightly into the water, and the ship, mirrored in the water, floats directly in the middle, while a huge, bright sun towards the top parallels the boat for a scene of utter symmetry and simplicity. The effect is almost overpowering, at once beautiful and inexpressibly lonely.

Another fascinating choice by Coleridge here is seen in his description of "slimy things" crawling around on the "slimy sea" (125-6). First of all, the evocatively negative language is somehow also beautiful and musical, with its use of repetition and alliteration; this confusion is powerfully effective upon the readers' emotions, again demonstrating the power of the actual *form* of a work to express something beyond the "mere" words. Also, as A.C. Swanepoel points out, using such vague yet visual terminology encourages the readers' imaginations in a way more powerful, perhaps, than a more specific description of these creatures might, which indicates Coleridge's understanding that art is most powerful when it is able to interact flexibly with a reader or viewer's imagination and interpretation. Swanepoel also points to Coleridge's use of the reconciliation of opposites, as when he paradoxically describes the water as burning (130), as a method of necessarily awakening the readers' imaginations in order to synthesize the possible and impossible aspects of the poem – the visible and invisible Natures mentioned in the epigraph – into a complete whole. Once again, the necessity of the free interaction between the work of art and the individual reader's mind is shown to be necessary in the creation of connection and meaning.

The theme of silence continues into Part III, as the men, dazed by heat and parched, are

unable to make a sound even in response to the sight of an approaching shape (157-8). It is the Mariner who musters enough strength to speak – by biting his arm and drinking some of his own blood. Though the ideas of blood and sacrifice carry deeply Christological overtones, the meaning of this act is not clear. It seems evident, however, that the need to articulate is strong – this, as we are discussing, is key. Isolation can only be escaped through the concrete action of communication. Given the use of the pronoun "we" in the preceding lines, it seems apparent that the majority of the crew has spotted the sail, so the Mariner does not suck his own blood out of a desperation to let the others know; in spite of their shared knowledge, there seems still to be a strong necessity for someone to give words to this silent knowledge, to bind the men together and express their mutual hope concretely. It seems similar to the sailors' deep-rooted need to break the silence in the previous section, and again indicates the importance of communication and the physicalization of thoughts and so meaning, which links back to Coleridge's definition of art as mediator between thought and thing.

This section, in its depiction of the ghost ship and its eerie crew, contains some of the poem's most haunting images. What is it that makes these images so powerful? For the first time the Mariner and his companions are encountering the truly mythological, spiritual aspects of reality, and a very dark form of them. As readers, the story, which so far could more or less have been understood naturalistically, takes on a particularly fantastical tone. We as readers, like the sailors, don't know what we are dealing with as the ship approaches; yet Coleridge builds the tension slowly and masterfully, using compelling images (such as the Sun staring through the dungeon-grate of the skeletal ship in lines 177-180) to create fascination and horror in the readers. Death and Life-in-Death arrive, dole out destruction, and disappear without much explanation, even in the gloss (though the gloss fills in more details regarding the two beings'

wager), beyond their external effects and the Mariner's feelings of terror, leaving the reader

thrilled and terrified as well, if without a strong sense of the purpose or meaning of the horrifying

encounter. The Mariner's crewmates drop dead, one by one, their souls flying from their bodies

like, he says, "the whizz of my cross-bow!" (223). This reminds us again of the duality of body

and soul that in part creates the difficulty of human communication; furthermore, we are brought

to understand that the death of the crewmembers is, at least to the Mariner's mind, due to his

violence against the Albatross. Again, this seeming vengeance is not explicitly discussed, and the

disproportionate nature of the punishment, if that is what it is, reinforces a readers' sense of the

seemingly arbitrary patterns of cause and effect in this poem. Coleridge's own words are again

brought to mind, regarding how the poem ought to be as amoral as a tale from the *Arabian

Nights;* the meaning that seems to be conveyed, then, is not one of a just and ordered world but

of an arbitrary and terrifying one, which is a perspective that speaks to a part of human

experience, whether explicitly laid out or not.

Interestingly, neither the illustrations nor the gloss quite manage to do this fantastical

scene justice. The gloss, perhaps unsurprisingly, persists in explanatory notes on the plot, aside

from some cryptic, poetic hints such as the comment accompanying lines 199-202, "No twilight

within the courts of the Sun." Doré, though successfully reflecting the mood of the scene through

his skillful use of shading, particularly in his depiction of Death, is also somewhat thwarted in

his attempt by his love of detailing the human body and emotion; the result is so strangely

concrete and physiological, with an emphasis on the dramatic poses of the Mariner and the other

sailors, that the fantastic nature and layers of indefinable meaning are somewhat lost. Emerson,

of course, falls back on caricature (Fig. 6), depicting Life-in-Death as a grotesquely thin and

somewhat manic woman, Death as a stout skeleton smoking a cigar, and the sailors' spirits as

Figure 6: Emerson, Life-in Death, pg. 22   Figure 7: Young, The Curse, pg. 21

Halloween-style ghosts; and Young perhaps comes closest, with the blurry figures of Death and

Life-in-Death dwarfed at the top of the looming black ship against an ominous red sky, and with

his charcoal sketches of the open-eyed dead sailors (he, wisely perhaps, makes no attempt to

depict their fleeing spirits), but he too tries to express the emotion of the moment through the

Mariner's pose (Fig. 7), which simply falls flat in light of the power of the moment in the poem.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the illustrations are unable to fully grasp the scene, as it is not only

incredibly fantastical, but also rife with unexpressed, undefined significance. In scenes like these,

Coleridge's imaginative language is able to balance vague descriptions (allowing readers to fill

in the fantastic imagery, more satisfyingly, themselves) with the presence of unspoken,

indefinable meanings; the illustrations, unable to avoid a physical depiction of the scene, must

fall back on the descriptive aspects of the poem. This exemplifies the necessity of imagination

and of symbol in such works, whether visual or written, and exposes some of the truth behind

Coleridge's own concerns with illustrations of imaginative poetry.

Silence returns to the ship. Not only is the Mariner alone on a ship surrounded by dead

bodies – which, as physical husks, are mere semblances of the living humans that the Mariner once strove to communicate with, and create an even greater sense of isolation and silence – but he is unable even to pray (244-47). In this situation, the Mariner seems the perfect representation of humanity in isolation, unable to communicate, with no one (even God) to hear him, anyway. This is the Mariner's curse, and it is a curse which traps him as a physical being, surrounded by the shells of physical beings, self-enclosed and "alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!" (232-34). This plaintive line sums up the plight of humanity, when isolated and devoid of a means of communication and connection, in a way that is beautiful and deeply meaningful in spite of, and because of, its simplicity and repetition. As an expression of isolation, the line is ironic in that it perfectly creates a connection with the reader, while, also ironically, pairing the inclusive, relational words "all, all" with "alone."

It is in this most powerful and inexpressible moment that the illustrations fail to have the same effect on the reader as Coleridge's simple and repetitive words. Doré, as always, falls back on the human body in his attempts to express human emotion, positioning the Mariner in a wild, agonized pose which, coupled with the almost luxurious sprawl of dead bodies and the unnecessary inclusion of a whole horde of saints piously ignoring the Mariner, results in melodrama (Fig. 8). Although Doré's subtle use of the emotive human body is quite beautiful and meaningful in other scenes, in this case the result is inappropriately theatrical, given the simplicity of Coleridge's own words. Emerson, perhaps unsurprisingly, chooses to mock the intensity of emotion in this scene, with a panel that shows the ship from far above, with a large, dramatically curly speech bubble rising from it which just says, "Wah!" His reaction, as always, is to make the same mistake as Doré or the gloss – but purposefully, and for comedic effect. In spite of his mockery, which may reveal a tinge of the insecurity at the heart of much humor in its
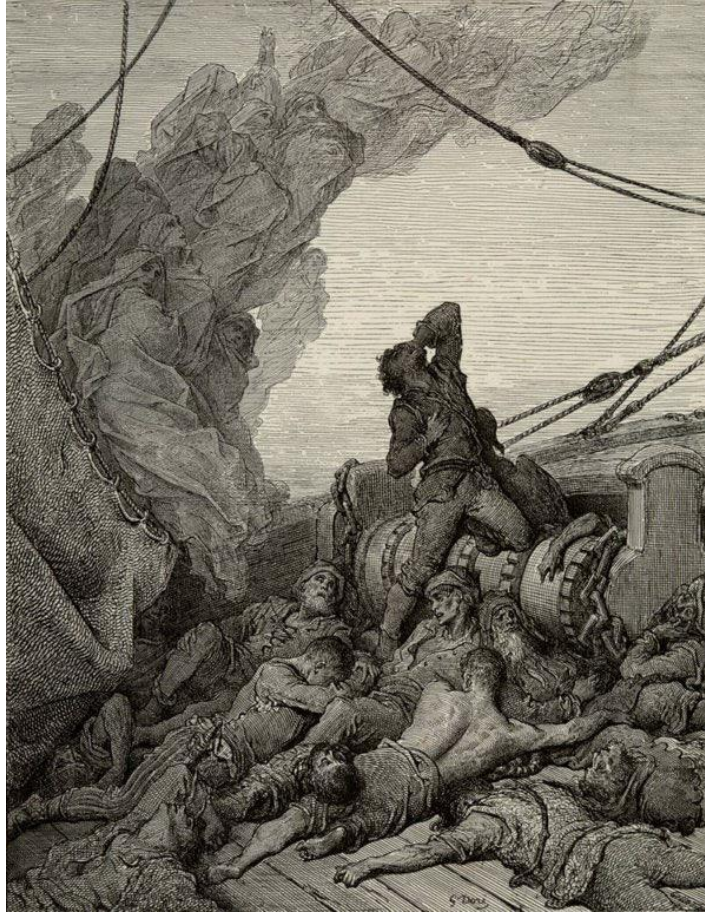
Figure 8: Doré, Alone on a Wide Wide Sea, pg. 33

fear of the poem's depths, this panel is somewhat appropriate, if only in that his choice to have

the Mariner respond to his isolation by deteriorating into a wordless cry indicates the

inexpressible nature of the experience. Young, on the other hand, does not choose to accompany

these words with an illustration at all. Remembering his comment about the way that words and

art are complementary, and each can do things the other cannot, I find myself thinking that this

was quite wise of him – that though the experience of human isolation can be represented

through visual art, it might take a masterpiece, and the best accompaniment to Coleridge's

effective poetry, here, is no accompaniment.

It is soon after this point that the gloss breaks away into that beautiful description of the

sojourning moon and stars (263-266) in a poetic aside that helps begin a kind of conversion

moment. The Mariner is described as yearning "toward the journeying Moon," and the stars to

which the "blue sky" belongs, and "is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own

native homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected, and yet there is

a silent joy in their arrival." At this point the gloss bridges the gap somewhat using analogies,

and moves from its artificial, descriptive language to the powerful metaphorical language of

poetry, enabling it to truly affect the readers. It is almost as though even the scholarly voice is

unable to resist the call to truly express, to fully utilize the power of physical words, images, and

the imagination. Directly following, as the Mariner describes the sea and the colorful

watersnakes, his blessing of which will result in the lifting of his curse – an act of connection,

though unverbalized, and directed towards nature rather than humanity – he asserts that "no

tongue / their beauty might declare" (282-3). Such an assertion is ironic, as one might assume

that the whole point of poetry, as seen in the previous passage of the gloss, is to attempt to

describe things that are beautiful. However, paradoxically, it seems apparent that poetry and art

often concern themselves with dealing with the indescribable; and that is the crux of the whole

matter. And Coleridge's poetry, through its very rhythm, as well as the lovely analogies of the

gloss, does succeed in taking us beyond the words, into an awe that transcends speech, just as the

Mariner describes. This is the other necessary layer of connection: if a work of art works, it will

create a connection with the viewer or reader, erasing isolation by transcending outward. We

experience in Coleridge's subtle use of language in this passage, as in the meaningful movement

from "Beyond the shadow of the ship" (272) to "Within the shadow of the ship" (277), or in his

powerful use of paradox and metaphor when he describes the water as "burnt away / A still and

awful red" (271-272), and, vividly, the light as falling off the water-snakes in "hoary flakes"

(276). All of these are examples of Coleridge's ability to share a moment and an experience, not

by describing it concretely, but by transcending mere description and creating a connection with the reader through the much more powerful, indirect tools of metaphor and paradox.

This scene is particularly relevant to the argument of this paper given its emphasis on the Mariner reaching out to external entities, its use of the idea of blessing, and the link between the Mariner's ability to pray and the beginnings of his redemption. It is interesting that this moment, when healing begins, is not depicted as a sort of psychological understanding, but as a spontaneous, unaware gush of love. The Mariner's unspoken blessing – which could be considered a paradox if one is thinking of the traditional, church blessing, and which deeply touches on the flexibility of the gap between thought and communication or action – is inspired by the very beauty of the watersnakes, which means he cannot take credit for it. It is also depicted as spontaneous, which links it to his later compulsion leading him to tell his tale to specific people he encounters – linking these two not only implies something about the compulsive, instinctive nature of human communication, but also draws parallels from the moment of blessing and freedom, and the Mariner's seeming curse of needing to relate his tale, hinting that the two are not so different as they may seem. Connection is necessary, whether the experience or thoughts being communicated are externally positive or not.

Doré's depiction of this scene (see Fig. 9) seems to portray the moment before redemption, rather than the conversion moment itself. This in itself is an interesting choice, and seems to agree with Grant Scott's assertion that there is little redemption in Doré's interpretation of the poem; the overall tone remains melancholy, in spite of the reader's knowledge that something redemptive is about to happen. In Doré's depiction of the Mariner watching the water-snakes, he is not even watching them. He is turned away towards the viewers, looking forlorn, and the albatross, which hangs between his legs as be perches on the prow, is *enormous*. So, too,

Figure 9: Doré, The Watersnakes, pg. 41

are the snakes, which twist muscularly in the water that takes up the lower right section of the

plate. The strong diagonal line, created by the ship, leads the eyes from the bottom left to the top

right, toward the stars – the Mariner almost seems lost in a jumble of rigging, and the snakes

appear powerful and mysterious in the free space of the water against the dark backdrop of the

sky. We as viewers are floating just outside the ship, but on his level. The presence of the chain,

which loosely parallels the prow, seems to highlight themes of imprisonment (and so the lack of

freedom, which Coleridge touches on with the words "from my neck so free" in line 290).

Young, on the other hand, has a pastel centerfold that depicts the ship and the "blue,

glossy green, and velvet black" sea, with the "golden fire" of the snakes' tracks. The sky and sea

> "Within the shadow of the ship
> I watched their rich attire:
> Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
> They coiled and swam; and every track
> Was a flash of golden fire.
>
> "O happy living things! no tongue
> Their beauty might declare:
> A spring of love gushed from my heart,
> And I blessed them unaware;
> Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
> And I blessed them unaware.
>
> "The selfsame moment I could pray;
> And from my neck so free
> The Albatross fell off, and sank
> Like lead into the sea."

Their beauty and their happiness.

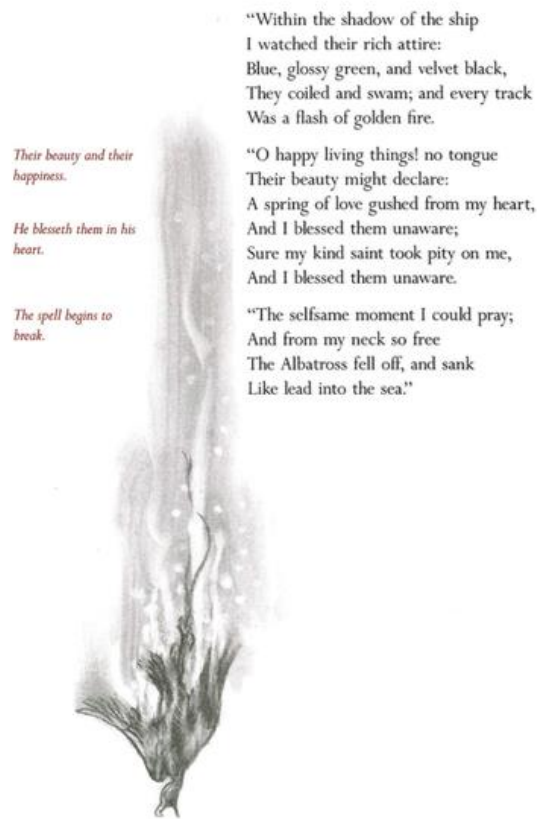*He blesseth them in his heart.*

The spell begins to break.

Figure 10: Young, The Sinking Albatross, pg. 27

gently slope to create a horizontal angle, the golden track leads from the ship out to the viewer almost as if we are the snakes at the end; the mariner is barely a smear on the page, and then the charcoal sketch that accompanies the text on the next page is of the albatross sinking head-first into the sea, its beak hanging open in a silent cry, trailing its rope and bubbles (Fig. 10). Why does Young choose to depict the ship and then the albatross alone, rather than the full moment? His choice is similar to Doré's, in this way; however, unlike Doré, he portrays both the moment before redemption and the moment after, and his details are focused on the sea and the albatross, rather than the character of the Mariner. His first, pastel illustration, like all of his pastel spreads, is heavily evocative; the colors, though literally mirroring those so visually described by Coleridge, are both eerie and beautiful – stormy, almost, creating the sense that something

momentous is about to occur. The grandness of the scene makes the tiny, detailed sketch of the Albatross all the more poignant. Readers find themselves considering, again, the Mariner's victim, rather than the Mariner himself, in this moment of apparent redemption and freedom; as in Doré's depiction, then, the result is appropriately bittersweet.

Emerson, of course, has numerous panels depicting the scene (Fig. 11). These are largely only in black and gold, and he spends a long time on the physical humor of the mariner attempting to get the albatross to fall off into the sea, with it (for, in his comic, the albatross never really dies) frantically resisting. Without taking him too seriously, why does he choose to make the scene humorous in this particular way? First it is worth pointing out Emerson's typical style in his connection of the word "blessing" to sneezing – the Mariner blesses the water-snakes only when one of them sneezes, which makes the action not only spontaneous and unintentional, but quite inane as well. Then, of the long struggle he depicts between the Mariner and the albatross, it can be linked to Doré and Young's depiction in that, like them, he makes the scene quite a bit more difficult than Coleridge wrote it to be; rather than a simple silent blessing followed by perfect redemption and freedom, there is struggle. Of course, however optimistic this scene of the poem may seem, it must be remembered that the Mariner is far from done with his sufferings and penance; perhaps the pessimism of the three artists' scenes shows this. Also, again, we don't want to take Emerson too seriously; yet I believe his depiction of this scene has some interpretative poignancy mixed in with the slapstick comedy. His Mariner is haunted by the living Albatross throughout the comic book; he is never able to lose the product or reminder of his "sin," and the albatross even becomes his partner towards the end, and facilitates his begging for coins following the recitation of his story. The primary purpose of Emerson's comic is humor, so it is entirely possible that attempting to find deeper meanings in his depiction of this

Figure 11: Emerson, The Curse is Lifted, pgs. 32-33

scene results in the same artificial seeking of patterns and morals that as that of the glossator. For

this reason, I do not insist that Emerson is thoughtfully interpreting here, but only suggest that

his choices are interesting and *may* be worth considering.

Turning to the next section of the poem, the line "I moved, and could not feel my limbs…

I thought that I had died in sleep, / And was a blessed ghost" (305, 307-308), describe the

Mariner's feelings of physical faintness. But more than that, they reintroduce the dichotomy of

body and spirit, which is soon continued as the dead bodies surrounding the Mariner are

inhabited by angelic spirits, which help him work the ship. The most relevant passage in this

section is found in lines 350-366, which depict the spirits singing. Their sounds are described

almost as physical beings themselves, which pass from the bodies (353) and dart around in the

sky (354). This is a wonderful image of the embodied nature of communication, and one that could be almost perfectly applied to art as we describe it; though the sounds are assigned no explicit meaning, they are deeply meaningful as well as embodied and beautiful.

> It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
>
> Like a meadow-gale of spring—
>
> It mingled strangely with my fears,
>
> Yet it felt like a welcoming. (456-59)

The above lines are worth discussing because of their beauty; but more than that, they are an excellent example of the power of language to capture the most strange, indescribable parts of human experiences. The Mariner is describing a physical breeze, which somehow jumps the fence into spirituality to mingle with his fears, while paradoxically feeling like a welcoming. The lines between the physical and the spiritual are very thin in this passage, which is the nature of art and of human experience. A breeze, though physical, is almost symbolic in its suggestion of both motion and spirit; this complex nature emphasizes the deep link between the physical and the transcendent. Shortly after, the Mariner describes the spiritual beings, as they emerge from the crewmembers' bodies, waving in silence – "No voice did they impart--/ No voice; but oh! the silence sank / Like music on my heart" (497-99). Again, this is communication that goes beyond words or physical reality, and that is compared to music – a form of art – in its ability to sink into a human's metaphorical heart. It contrasts starkly with the isolating silences described previously, and speaks to the reality of transcendence in communication (and, so, art).

The Mariner closes his story by directly addressing the Wedding-Guest, bringing us back into the over-arching framework of one human being compulsively attempting to communicate a story, an experience, to another.

O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been

Alone on a wide wide sea:

So lonely 'twas, that God himself

Scarce seemed there to be. (597-600)

To this reader, the lines above represent the heart of this poem; the Mariner's experience, more than anything else, describes the human experience of isolation and disconnection that occurs without communication. The ending platitude is the only way the Mariner knows to try and express what he has experienced – and though it falls short, it does also contain seeds of truth in its emphasis on community and connection, and the Wedding Guest gets something from the overall tale, rising "A sadder but a wiser man" the next day (624). Somehow, in spite of the failure of words that is apparent in the Mariner's falling back on simplistic, moralistic platitudes, his story has imparted something of meaning to his listener, and also to his readers. As Richard Haven puts it so well, the Mariner "cannot explain; he can only describe" (20). He "knows what happened to him, but he does not understand what happened. His was an experience of overwhelming significance, but he can state that significance only in conventional and traditional terms," as in the ending (21). Throughout the poem, "We are made to share the Mariner's experience to such a degree that we are forced to acknowledge its reality" (22). In essence, Haven argues, the poem is "a 'myth' whose 'meaning' is not a set of ideas and attitude but a psychic process… made available to contemplation in the concrete object of the poem… an objective correlative for what can otherwise be known but not conceived" (35). This sums up the power of art, which completes, through its very symbolic nature, what pure reason or fact cannot in an understanding of the human experience. Myth, or art, or faith – all of these are necessary for us as humans to understand the world, because even if we believe everything is just atoms we

don't experience it that way, and this reality is in many ways much more important than the "truth."

Here, in the ending, the moral fails to connect with the reader – unlike the true art and poetry of the work itself, its pedantic moralizing takes us nowhere. The ways the three artists' choose to depict this section, then, is telling: will they take it seriously, try to depict it literally, or somehow move beyond it, and move us with them? Their reactions are, of course, typical to their styles. Emerson, as discussed before, utilizes physical humor as he depicts the Mariner theatrically and cheesily reciting the moral, contorting himself into a beggar's song and dance before running "off stage" with a grin, followed by the Albatross, who collects coins from the stunned Wedding Guest. Emerson is sharply aware of the inadequacy of the ending, and even sticks it to Coleridge a little – by having the Mariner use the Albatross in his profitable entertainment, he could be referencing Coleridge's use of the story for such a simplistic moral, and perhaps his use of such a fantastical, horrifying tale for popular entertainment value.

Doré's final engraving is, as may be expected by now, saturated with the emotion of its characters. The Mariner, large and dark in the foreground, walks slowly and wearily away from the city and the upturned, sorrowful face of the Wedding Guest. He is bowed down, as if with the weight of his tale and isolation, and even drags along a staff which he holds in a way reminiscent of Christ carrying his cross. Doré, then, spends little time attempting to distill the speaker's moral, which is reflective of his way of viewing the engravings as separate from the actual text of the poem; rather, he continues to be fascinated with the lonely, wandering character of the Mariner, and accompanies words extolling the virtues of community with an image of a man compelled to briefly connect, and then return to being utterly alone.

I would argue that Young, whose illustration accompanying this section (see Fig. 12) is

"To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his great Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
And youths and maidens gay!

And to teach by his own
example love and
reverence to all things
that God made and
loveth.

"Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
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."

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.

(1797-1798; 1798)

Figure 12: Young, The Lighthouse, pgs. 53-54

the simplest of the three, is also the most successful in depicting the general meaning of the speaker's moral, while also remaining in a space that is evocative and meaningful rather than flat. His final sketch is small and plain – he simply depicts the lighthouse mentioned back at the very beginning of the poem, the lighthouse that represented the last connection to community. It is a very unassuming structured, undetailed and alone, and though surrounded by only the blank white space of the page, it seems perched on the very edge of something. Through this very simple picture, Young portrays what I believe the speaker himself, Emerson and Doré could not quite grasp in this final section: using a symbol – which again, both represents and embodies meaning – he evocatively brings his readers into an understanding of the importance of community, connection, and communication.

Conclusion

Doré's fascination with the lonely, suffering Mariner, and with the details and drama of human emotions; Emerson's comic response which occasionally, in mocking the poem's intensity, reveals a fear of its depths; and Young's simple symbols and emotive use of color and space – all three artists fail and succeed differently in their attempts to transmit to the mind of the reader, through their physical yet transcendent work, something of the human experience of isolation. As we have seen, at some points they complicate our understanding of the poem; at others, they clarify it. This seems only fitting – the work itself is complex, and any reactions to it are inevitably so as well. Through examining Doré's work, readers of the poem gain a deeper understanding of the Mariner as defined by his isolation, and are also able to see the points at which a detail or an expression or physical pose is unable to fully capture the inexpressible experience of this isolation. Emerson's comic book reinforces Coleridge's idea of the absurdity of descriptive, explanatory or abstract language when dealing with the visceral experiences of human life; and Young, sticking perhaps most closely to what Coleridge would have considered imaginative illustration, given his view on symbol and on imagination, is able to capture the emotion of the tale indirectly through color and space, and to sum up the "moral" of the story – its emphasis upon the value of community – much more appropriately than even Coleridge does, through the symbol of the lighthouse. In this way, on top of the light such an exploration has shed on the function of art as seen through the relationship between word and illustration, taking the work of all three artists into consideration is an illuminating exercise in conjunction with studying the poem itself in regards to these questions of communication, art and isolation.

Throughout this exploration of Coleridge's wild poem, the power of language has been demonstrated – its power in subtly articulating the uncanny and the transcendent, in physically

taking part in the meaning signified by the words through their very form. We have examined the gloss's efforts to explain a story that is ultimately unexplainable, and the attempts of the artists to translate and capture Coleridge's work, sometimes failing and sometimes succeeding at conveying the imaginative poem's depths of meaning through similarly imaginative visual art. From these various discussions, there is one theme that has emerged which I wish to speak to briefly by way of conclusion, and that is the theme of isolation. The overall experience that this beautiful, strange poem seems to depict so powerfully is that of a soul literally lost at sea, cut off from community and unable to connect through the physical medium of communication. Not only is this experience inexpressible, but it is ironic that by attempting to convey the impact of this experience to his readers, Coleridge inevitably breaches the gap, creates connection, and erases isolation through the communicative "thing" and "thought" that is a work of art. Connection is built through story and symbol, whether it be conveyed through words or music or image. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* in a sense, demonstrates the value and power of art in the never-ending human attempts to transcend and to connect.

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Appendix on Faith and Learning

I was initially drawn to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* while studying it during the second British Literature survey class at SPU. As I mentioned in my personal introduction to the project, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of the fantastical poem, but was hesitant to attempt to interpret it for fear of reducing it to a simplistic allegory, imposing my own rigid meaning upon it. This tension between mystery and analysis is ever present. Some part of my evangelical background has remained with me in the residual idea that it is wrong to dissect anything too sacred, which, in the context that this was impressed upon me, meant knotty theological issues, but for me came to mean literature. Given the ambiguous and seemingly arbitrary parts of life, do we try desperately to put things into words and fit ideas and experiences into a prescribed pattern, risking reduction for the sake of understanding, or do we proclaim life an unsolvable riddle? Is there somewhere in between? For much of my life, having grown tired of a questioning mind in face of a world that often refused to make sense, I chose to be content with seeing existence as too complex to figure out, and ignored the voice urging me to keep digging until I understood.

The *Ancient Mariner,* in particular, was a poem I was not eager to explore too analytically. As we studied it, and particularly as we discussed the function of the gloss, which fails laughably if its task is truly to clarify the poem, I came to the conclusion that Coleridge himself did not intend for the poem to be entirely comprehensible. The irony of the gloss, and the triteness of the poem's concluding moral as compared to the dream-like grandiosity of the rest, seems to attest to this, in the poet's mockery of the human tendency to reduce or dissect in order to understand and to express. What, then, was his intent? As I explored the poem on my own, I returned constantly to certain themes: the irrational and mysterious nature of life, the difficulty of

describing or critically understanding these non-physical, mysterious or absurd pieces of human experience, the human experience of isolation, and the struggle to connect spiritually through physical bodies and physical communication. This was the seed of what I chose to delve into more deeply throughout the project, through my research into the text, its gloss, and its illustrations throughout its history.

I returned to the study of this poem as an agnostic, attempting to maintain the split vision that an acceptance of both questioning and the reality of mystery and paradox provide. I still sometimes feel the need to preserve a literary work as holy and inconceivable whenever I discover the aggressive reality that said work can, to some extent, be understood. However, I have come to the conclusion that as humans part of our purpose is to keep learning and reaching as much as we can, not violently, but gently, openly, in a way conscious of our innately subjective condition, and of the reality of the mysterious paradox of human experience. This attitude lends itself well to the study of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which defies complete comprehension but is therefore all the more rewarding to explore, and particularly to the discussion of artistic creation as an attempt to make incarnate mysterious and even incomprehensible ideas regarding the ambiguous and non-physical aspects of human existence. Through exploring how Coleridge and his illustrators embody ideas in words and images, I am truly exploring how humans in general create meaning for themselves as they explore their paradoxical identities as both transcendent and physical beings.

There are few avenues as well-suited to this act of meaning-making as literature and art – there has always been a connection between the arts and the spiritual, or between ideas of beauty and meaning. Of course, meaning and truth as found in literature differ from meaning found in religion, in part, because the products of human attempts to embody thoughts and ideas are

inevitably subjective, or "imperfect." I, as an English major, see the beauty in this; but it then becomes tempting to absolutize any single voice or work or story, to make poetry hard and cold and objective, a concrete answer to a question (something I saw done only too often with the poetry and artistry of the Bible, for example). It is important, then, to continually keep in mind that the truths unearthed through the exploration of art and literature remain "only" personal attempts to quantify unquantifiable ideas. This is another way in which literature is a powerful tool for understanding and making meaning - by presenting a million different subjective stories, we perhaps are able to see truth in the sum of the whole. Through acknowledging and embracing this ambiguity, the limitations and beauties of embodied and subjective meanings, literature is a more honest depiction of reality than anything claiming to be objective and all-encompassing. I also affirm the idea that meaning and goodness can be found through these specific, contextual human experiences and creations, as may be obvious from my (perhaps overly-ambitious) view of the importance of the ideas unearthed throughout this project regarding humanity's state as bodies that are more than bodies, words that are more than words and paint that is more than paint, and the necessity of connection.

Given my lack of religious faith, the relationship between Christianity and scholarship has been incorporated into this project somewhat indirectly. As the paragraph above may suggest, I address the question in part through my engagement with art and literature as meaning-making in a way that is, for me, similar to what faith may be for others. More specifically, however, the poem has deep religious connections, and has been analyzed in relation to its compatibility with Christian doctrine; I touch on some such interpretations very briefly. The key idea, I feel, is this: we as humans tend to see patterns and create meaning for ourselves, and religion is one framework among many which often seems to be forced onto reality, causing

experiences to be molded to match its pre-existing ideas. However, I am not, as an agnostic,

arguing that the Mariner's experience is *meaningless,* or that any interpretation, involving

religion or not, is purely wrong; this would not be reflective of my worldview. Rather, I argue for

the idea that the Mariner's universe, like our own, contains a *something-elseness,* which is

expressed and contained in the mysteriously physical and more-than-physical nature of reality,

and which cannot truly be explained by any framework; and it is this something-elseness which

artists and humans in general work so hard to capture, to express, and, in order to form the

relationships that give life meaning, to share.