**The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**

There is a lot of information available on line and the story is relatively straightforward and there is very little to be said about character - apart from the mariner himself. it's usually the language and the theme which cause difficulty. For A level study, students will be expected to place the poem in a context both culturally and in terms of Coleridge's own writing. To do this with any confidence they also need to know the poem reasonably well.

One way of tackling theme and language is to divide the poem up into sections and ask students (individually or in pairs) to study their section and provide a gloss on words, phrases etc which seem unclear. The most interesting way to do this is using Word with hyperlinks, footnotes or comments. Insert Comment is probably the quickest and simplest (see Merlin and Vivien). These can then be shared and, in the process, quality assured by the teacher!

There is a debate about the extent of archaic language in the poem. Coleridge was criticised for it at the time so an activity for students might be to decide which words were 'of the period' and which were archaic even at the time Coleridge wrote.

Given the poet's well-known use of mind-altering substances, students might like to pick out from the poem those stanzas which they think might have been written under the influence, so to speak.

**Themes and Issues**

Rather than tell your students what the themes and issues are in the poem, why not give them a list of possibilities and get them to put them in order, starting with the ones they think are most important, down to the least important, irrelevant or just plain wrong?

Here are some possibilities in the form of statements, using the Rime of the Ancient Mariner as an example. You could make them into a Word document (and add some of your own) so that they can work on it on paper or on screen. I would ask students to do some research around these ideas and add their comments / evidence next to each.

* The poem illustrates the Romantics fascination with the fantastic, the grotesque, dreams and superstition.
* The poem is about sin and retribution. The Mariner sins by killing the albatross, an innocent creature, and is punished.
* Fascination with death - another Romantic theme - provides the central motif of the poem.
* The poem is more of a dream or a vision than a story and is part of a literary strand connecting Blake on one side with Keats on the other.
* The poem is about redemption. Although the Mariner is orginally condemned to suffer endlessly, the intercession of the spirits reduces his suffering.
* The poem is concerned with arbitrary suffering: the world is a cruel and unjust place. For a thoughtless (rather than wicked) act, the Mariner and the whole innocent crew are condemned.
* The poem is a gothic horror story of the kind enjoyed by other Romantics such as Shelley and has little actual 'meaning'.

**What does it mean?**

Many students and teachers wrestle with the Rime to try and make its 'meaning' clear. The following are my thoughts on the issue and should be treated with due caution.

My first thought is, if we have to struggle to determine the message or the meaning of the poem, doesn't that imply that the writer was either not very clear himself or that he wasn't very good at expressing himself? It's not that we want everything to be made obvious and superficial, but if generations of readers have had the same experience and been unable to come up with a generally agreed answer, it suggests that there isn't one.

**The poet as philosopher**

Poets frequently come out with sweeping statements - (see Keats' 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty...', for example, and many of D H Lawrence's poems). Perhaps it's one of the things we expect of them. Lots of song-writers do exactly the same. These can be statements about life, relationships, the universe and everything. Yet unlike a philosopher, a poet is not required to provide a logical argument to support what he or she says.

If we find The Rime ambiguous, confusing and contradictory it’s probably because it is not a clearly thought out message rendered in poetic form, it's a meandering tale written by a poet who a) held a mish-mash of views himself, b) was reacting against a tradition which (in his view) over-valued Reason and c) had an opium habit. Therefore, we should no more expect a clear message from it than we would from a dream. What we have instead are impressions, attitudes and feelings heavily influenced by the Romantic notions which were gathering force at the time. These notions declared that feelings were more important than facts and elevated the importance of visions, dreams and the supernatural.

The age which grew out of this, the Victorian period, saw a fascination with the supernatural, with death, angels and all sorts of gothic religiosity which can be explained partly as an unconscious reaction against the steady development of scientific explanations of the world around them. The medieval / gothic theme can be seen in much Victorian writing, usually re-interpreted in a Romantic way - knights in shining armour, for example.

Readers have had similar difficulties trying to construct a coherent world-view from William Blake's writings. One can extract parcels of wisdom (e.g. 'a robin redbreast in a cage puts all heaven in a rage') in the same way that we can deduce some messages from The Rime, e.g. don't do something bad, it'll not only bring bad things in its wake but will weigh on your conscience thereafter.

**Other reading**

Northanger Abbey, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Idylls of the King, The Lady of Shallott, Blake, Gothic horror...and compare the artistic output of the 1960s and 70s with its mind-expanding psychedelia.

**Nature, Man and the Supernatural**

In many cultures there is a strand of belief that links these three in a triangular relationship. For example, a rain-dance or prayer might influence God/gods to alter the forces of nature to bring about rain.

In many myths, gods act in capricious, unpredictable ways. They might take against you for being too beautiful, for example. They also establish inexplicable rules (e.g. don't eat the apple, don't cut your hair) and dish out punishments quite out of proportion to the alleged misdeed committed (for example, Zeus transformed a nymph, Chelone, into a tortoise because she refused to attend his wedding, Adam and Eve and all subsequent generations are condemned mortality, toil and trouble for eating the forbidden fruit).

In The Rime, we can see this connection developed in new ways. For his 'sin' in killing the albatross, he has somehow offended supernatural forces which in their turn have made the winds drop with the result that thirst kills all his shipmates. There is a new element in the gambling between two agents of the supernatural, Death and 'Life-in-Death' which emphasises the capricious nature of these forces. In addition, there is the scenes in which the crew's souls ascend to heaven and the Mariner wins some kind of partial reprieve by inadvertently blessing the sea creatures. (He surely is, like Lear, more sinned against than sinning, surely!)

Students could be given a selection of myths and legends (or carry out some research themselves) and then pick out aspects which have parallels in The Rime.

© Trevor Millum 2021