

Reading for Information

from Coleridge's Dreamscape: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"



Use with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," page 814.



READING 10A Evaluate the merits of an argument, action, or policy by analyzing the relationships among evidence, inferences, assumptions, and claims in text. **10B** Draw conclusions about the credibility of persuasive text by examining its implicit and stated assumptions about an issue as conveyed by the specific use of language.

Samuel Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a tale of supernatural occurrences. Full of fantastic and dreamlike elements, it requires readers to suspend their ordinary disbelief of the otherworldly. Literary critic C. M. Bowra has praised Coleridge for his vivid and compelling rendition of events that might otherwise seem contrived and unbelievable.

Skill Focus: Analyze Literary Criticism

If you've ever read a book review, you've already read **literary criticism**, the category of writing that evaluates literary works, genres, and ideas. Literary criticism, most often presented as a book review or an essay, strives to help readers better understand and appreciate literary works. Typically, it does this by providing the following:

- information about the work's historical or literary context
- a description of the text itself
- an evaluation of the work according to implicitly or explicitly stated criteria

A literary critic often writes persuasively, convincing readers that his or her position—a central **claim** or **argument** about the work—is worth taking seriously. The critic will present his or her **assumptions** and additional claims about the work and provide evidence to support them. As an engaged reader, you should identify the critic's position and evaluate the reasons and evidence given as support for it. Then you'll want to consider whether you agree or disagree with the critic's position. For help analyzing Bowra's essay, take notes on a chart such as the one shown here.

<i>Author's Position:</i>		
<i>Claims</i>	<i>Evidence</i>	<i>My Thoughts and Reactions</i>

Coleridge's Dreamscape:
“THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER”

BY C. M. BOWRA

The triumph of *The Ancient Mariner* is that it presents a series of incredible events through a method of narration which makes them not only convincing and exciting but in some sense a criticism of life. No other poet of the supernatural has quite done this, at least on such a scale and with such abundance of authentic poetry. In his conquest of the unknown, Coleridge went outside the commonplace thrills of horror. Of course, he evokes these, and his opening verses, in which the Mariner stays the Wedding-Guest, suggest that at first Coleridge followed familiar precedents in appealing to a kind of horrified fear. But as he worked at his poem, he widened its scope and created something much richer and more human. To be sure, he chose his subject well. The weird adventures of his Mariner take place not in the trite Gothic setting of a medieval castle . . . but on a boundless sea with days of pitiless sun and soft nights lit by a moon and attendant stars. . . . The new setting and the new persons with which Coleridge shapes the supernatural give to it a new character. Instead of confining himself to an outworn dread of specters and phantoms, he moves over a wide range of emotions and touches equally on guilt and remorse, suffering and relief, hate and forgiveness, grief and joy. Nor has his creation the misty dimness commonly associated with the supernatural. What he imagines is indeed weird, but he sees it with so sharp a vision that it lives vividly before our eyes. At each point he anticipates the objection that his is an outmoded kind of composition, and
 10 does the opposite of what his critics expect. **A**

The first problem for any poet of the supernatural is to relate it to familiar experience. So long as it was accepted as part of the scheme of things, there was no great difficulty in this. No doubt Homer's audience accepted the ghost of Odysseus' mother because they believed in ghosts and saw that they must be like this and behave in this way. But Coleridge could not rely on his readers' feeling at home with his unfamiliar theme. He must relate it to something which they knew and understood, something which touched their hearts and imaginations, and he did this by exploiting some of the characteristics of dream. Here was something which would appeal to them and through which they could be led to appreciate the remoter mysteries which
 20 he keeps in reserve. . . . **B**

Dreams can have a curiously vivid quality which is often lacking in waking impressions. In them we have one experience at a time in a very concentrated form, and, since the critical self is not at work, the effect is more powerful and more haunting than most effects when we are awake. If we remember dreams at all, we remember them very clearly, even though by rational standards they are quite absurd and have no direct relation to our waking life. They have, too, a power of stirring elementary emotions, such as fear and desire, in a very direct way, though we do not

A LITERARY CRITICISM

Reread this paragraph to identify Bowra's position on the poem. Then add a brief summary of his **claims** to your chart.

B LITERARY CRITICISM

In this paragraph, what **assumptions** does Bowra make about how Coleridge wrote his poem?

C LITERARY CRITICISM

What **claim** does Bowra make in this paragraph? What observations does he offer to support this claim?

D LITERARY CRITICISM

Critics often respond to the positions of other critics who have written about their subject. What criticism of the poem does Bowra cite in lines 48–50? What **argument** does he provide in the subsequent lines to refute it?

at the time ask why this happens or understand it, but accept it without question as a fact. It is enough that the images of dreams are so penetrated with emotional
40 significance that they make a single and absorbing impression. Coleridge was much attracted by their strange power. . . . On the surface *The Ancient Mariner* shows many qualities of dream. It moves in abrupt stages, each of which has its own single, dominating character. Its visual impressions are remarkably brilliant and absorbing. Its emotional impacts change rapidly, but always come with an unusual force, as if the poet were haunted and obsessed by them. When it is all over, it clings to the memory with a peculiar tenacity, just as on waking it is difficult at first to disentangle ordinary experience from influences which still survive from sleep. **C**

In the criticism of *The Ancient Mariner* which Wordsworth added to the edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1800, he complained that “the events, having no
50 necessary connection, do not produce each other.” Now no one expects the events of dream to have the kind of necessary connection which we find in waking life, and Wordsworth’s criticism is beside the mark. Indeed, he is less than fair to Coleridge, who gives to the world of his poem its own coherence and rules and logic. Things move indeed in a mysterious way, but not without some connecting relations which may reasonably be called causal. When in a fit of irritation or anger the Mariner shoots the albatross, he commits a hideous crime and is punished by the doom of “life-in-death,” which means that, after being haunted by the presence of his dead comrades, he carries a gnawing memory to the end of his days. His shipmates, too,
60 are the victims of the same laws when they are doomed to death as accomplices in his crime for saying that he was right to kill the bird. In such a system it is no less appropriate that when the Mariner feels love gushing from his heart at the sight of the watersnakes, he begins to break the first horror of his spell, and the albatross falls from his neck. Once we accept the assumption that it is wrong to kill an albatross, the rest of the action follows. . . .

This imaginary world has its own rules, which are different from ours and yet touch some familiar chord in us. Nor, when we read the poem, do we really question their validity. Indeed, they are more convincing than most events in dreams, and we somehow admit that in such a world as Coleridge creates it is right that things should happen as they do. It is not too difficult to accept for the moment the ancient belief that spirits
70 watch over human actions, and, once we do this, we see that it is right for them to interfere with men and to do extraordinary things to them. Both the figures on the skeleton ship and the spirits who guide the Mariner on his northward voyage have sufficient reality for us to feel that their actions are appropriate to their characters and circumstances. Nor is it absurd that, when the ship at last comes home, it sinks; it has passed through adventures too unearthly for it to have a place in the world of common things. It and its stricken inmate bear the marks of their ordeal, and it is no wonder that the Pilot’s boy goes mad at the sight or that the only person able to withstand their influence is the holy Hermit. Coleridge makes his events so coherent and so close to
80 much that we know in ourselves that we accept them as valid in their own world, which is not ultimately very dissimilar from ours. Because it has this inner coherence, *The Ancient Mariner* is not a phantasmagoria of unconnected events but a coherent whole which, by exploiting our acquaintance with dreams, has its own causal relations between events and lives in its own right as something intelligible and satisfying. **D**

Comprehension

1. **Recall** According to Bowra, what is new and remarkable about Coleridge's depiction of the supernatural? Be specific.
2. **Summarize** How, in Bowra's opinion, is Coleridge's poem like a dream?

Critical Analysis

3. **Examine Literary Criticism** In what ways does Bowra establish the literary context for this poem? Consider what he suggests about other literature and other writers of the time as well as literature of previous eras. How is this context relevant to his **claims** about the poem?
4. **Synthesize** Based on your reading of this essay, what qualities would you say Bowra **assumes** are most valuable in a poem? Choose one other poem in this unit and explain whether you think he would like or dislike it.



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Read for Information: Compare Your Reactions

WRITING PROMPT

How does C. M. Bowra's evaluation of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" compare with your own view of the poem? Consider whether you agree or disagree with his position.

To answer this prompt, follow these steps:

1. Consider the standards Bowra used to judge the poem. Would you use exactly the same standards? If not, identify the criteria by which you would judge the poem.
2. Evaluate the poem by your own standards, noting details from the text to support your position.
3. Compare your argument to Bowra's to identify the important points on which you agree or disagree.
4. Finally, write an essay in which you present your evaluation of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by comparing and contrasting your claims with Bowra's.

