



Mariner, Wedding Guest, or Albatross? Seeking the Ombuds in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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ABSTRACT

What relevance does a 200-year-old poem have for the young profession of ombuds work? At least some, the author hopes. Analyzing Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* through the lens of ombuds principle and practice, this essay considers where, in the poem, the ombuds can be found, offering a chance for self-reflection about the roles that an ombuds can play in an organization and, ultimately, how it may change them.

KEYWORDS

ombuds, empathy, poetry, meaning, introspection

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INTRODUCTION: STOPPING ONE OF THREE

We can learn a lot about ombuds work from other ombuds. We can learn a lot from related fields, like psychology and mediation. But can we learn from art?

I think so. At least, I think that I have learned from art. Because when I want to be a good active listener, I think not of articles about how to best listen, but about Ahmad Jamal's piano playing. The minimalism of "[Poinciana](#)," drawing the listener in, says a lot without saying a lot, giving the drums and bass the room they need to be heard. When talking with a visitor, I strive to consider my words and gestures as carefully as Jamal chooses his notes.*

Poetry can move us just as surely as images or music. In this case, I am drawn to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "[Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)" as an inspiration and even a warning. I will summarize the poem in the next section for those who aren't familiar or would like a reminder before focusing on a few of the characters, seeing what we can learn from that might pertain to our work.

Why this poem? I am honestly not completely sure. It made a big impact on me when I first encountered it in freshman English. And there is an [Iron Maiden song](#) that sums the poem up. I think that we can find meaning in anything if we look in the right—or wrong—direction. There is probably someone who can draw real insight from a symphony, and someone else who can use a traditional folk song to refocus us. We can all be better off for listening.

Why should you read what I have written here at this particular moment? I confess that I do not have an easy answer for you; in any event, I don't like telling people what they should do or why they should do it (maybe that's why I like being an organizational ombuds). At this moment I am feeling a bit like the Mariner: I have a message that I must share, but I am selectively. Note that the Mariner doesn't try to upstage the bride and groom at the wedding feast, doesn't insist that everyone hear his story. On the contrary: he is drawn to one specific person, which is why he starts the poem by stopping "one of three."

Reframed, this is a poem that has meant something to me in my ombuds journey. I hope and suspect that others might find some value in thinking deeply about it. I have a feeling that we will all be a bit too busy at the next IOA conference for me to waylay people outside sessions and stop them to share all this (hey, it's the best analogy I could find to the wedding feast), so I figured I would take advantage of modern communication technology and submit this to the JIOA.

So, if you choose to read on, imagine yourself stopped by a man with a long grey beard, a glittering eye, and something to share. While our friends continue to the wedding feast, you find yourself strangely compelled to listen....

THE POEM IN BRIEF

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1797 (and subsequently revised) poem [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#) tells a story within a story. An old sailor stops a wedding guest just as the nuptial ceremony is about to begin. To his dismay, the guest cannot help but listen to the tale: how the Mariner's ship was driven far off course to misty Antarctic waters, lost until a friendly albatross guides them northward. All is well until the Mariner pulls out his crossbow and kills the albatross. At first, his shipmates are angry—they had taken a liking to the bird—but when the fog clears,

* Writing this, a thought comes to me. At the slightest encouragement, I am ready to write a piece spiraling between ombuds work with visitors, jazz, and improv comedy. I see some connections.



they decide that the albatross deserved to die since it had brought the fog and mist. The ship is then becalmed near the equator, where the shipmates reverse themselves, hanging the dead albatross around the Mariner's neck as a symbol of the blame they now assign to him.

After the Mariner's ship is stuck a long time—long enough for dehydration to set in—a tattered-looking ship, crewed by Death and Life-in-Death, appears. They play dice, Death winning the crew, Life-in-Death winning the Mariner. The crew dies, with a final curse in their eyes directed at the Mariner, who, alone and in agony, is full of disgust for the “slimy things” that live on beneath him in the ocean. Unable to speak, unable to pray, he gazes at the shadow of the ship, sees the boldly colored sea creatures, and finds that he loves them. Unconsciously, he blesses them. The albatross drops from his neck, sinking like lead into the sea. He sleeps. He wakes to find that it is raining. He slakes his thirst. The dead men's bodies, steered by good spirits, rise and crew the ship, which moves again, without a breeze or tide.

The Mariner falls into a trance, overhearing a dialogue between two spirits who fill in the backstory: the Mariner has done penance, and has more to do. An Antarctic spirit who loved the bird that loved the Mariner (and was killed by him) is now driving the ship forward. Suddenly, the Mariner sees the lighthouse, hill, and church of his hometown. Stopped in the harbor under the moonlight, the Mariner watches as beings of pure light ascend from the bodies of the crew. As a boat rows towards it from the shore, the decrepit hulk of the Mariner's ship sinks like lead, leaving only the Mariner, who is pulled aboard. The pilot and his son are aghast at the Mariner's condition, but the boat's only other passenger, a holy hermit, bids the Mariner to reveal what manner of man he is. The tale of his fall and salvation is then wrenched from the Mariner, who can't help but speak it. Since then, the Mariner wanders the earth, seeking out the one to whom he must tell his story, the point of which is, to truly be happy and spiritually fulfilled, one must love “all creatures great and small,” made by the same creator.

His tale told, the Mariner leaves a stunned wedding guest in his wake, who rises the next morning “a sadder and wiser man” (Coleridge, 1834).

WHERE IS THE OMBUDS IN THE RIME?

The key theme of Coleridge's poem, as the narrator tells the reader towards the end, is empathy. A flash of love for the sea creatures—which, at first, he had found repugnant—begins the Mariner's penance. And the story that he is compelled to relive concludes with him chiding his listener that, to truly know peace, one must love all living creatures. Seems like a good enough message for someone who works in interpersonal conflict resolution.

But there are some deeper lessons for ombuds practice embedded in this two-hundred-year-old poem. To illustrate them, I'd like to play a game of “find the ombuds.” Which character is the ombuds? Which one is the visitor?

THE MARINER

He's the title character, after all, so ego might drive us to conclude that he must be the ombuds. Remembering that our main job is to listen, however, might force us to take a step back, since he talks an awful lot. Let's look at the Mariner, who might not make such a bad ombuds, even though shooting a friendly seabird may be a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the IOA's Standards of Practice.

We meet the Mariner outside of a wedding feast. He stops one of a party of three, seemingly at random but, as we learn later because the Mariner has been compelled to seek this specific person: “The moment that his face I see/I know the man that must hear me/to him my tale I teach” (Coleridge, 1834). The Mariner talks far too much to be an effective ombuds, I'll concede that; the



wedding guest only speaks four times in the whole poem, first complaining that the Mariner has stopped him, then asking why the Mariner looks so distraught, then, twice, expressing fear that the Mariner is some kind of supernatural terror. He doesn't exactly help the wedding guest explore his options.

The Mariner, despite his abysmal bedside manner, does have some ombuds-like qualities. First, he exists outside of society, reporting to no one on this earth. He doesn't seem fazed by status—the wedding guest, we can glean from the poem, is a man of some standing in the community, while the Mariner is a lone wanderer. And yet the Mariner has some power to compel those in authority to listen. As the bride enters the wedding hall, the wedding guest “beat his breast,” dismayed that he “cannot choose but hear” as the “bright-eyed Mariner” begins his tale (Coleridge, 1834).

The Mariner is separated from the natural order of society during his story, when Death wins the crew, while Life-in-Death wins him. Not suffering their punishment, apparently no longer answerable to Death, he watches silently while his 200 crewmen, with a final curse in their eyes, “dropped down one by one” (Coleridge, 1834). Their souls, feeling “to bliss or woe,” pass by him like the “whizz of my CROSS-BOW.” This is a telling detail, since the Mariner used that crossbow to slay the albatross, the deed that directly led to the crew dying. There is something ombuds-like about the Mariner standing apart from judgment. Not subject to the same rules as everyone else, he's still not in an enviable position. One senses that, though living, he envies the dead, who have at least gone to their reward. His loneliness might be his greatest affliction. Unable to sleep, parched with thirst, he is most bothered by his solitude:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I. (Coleridge, 1834)

It's not just that the Mariner is stuck in an unfriendly ocean, with the knowledge that he has only himself to blame; it's that he has no one to talk to. Solo practitioner ombuds might sometimes feel the same way. And the Mariner's predicament encapsulates the ombuds' dilemma: set aside from organizational structures, they may not have to worry about hierarchical power dynamics, but at the same time they are cut off from potentially supportive fellowship. The ombuds in their office, seeing a steady parade of visitors with problems while having few outlets to discuss their own, may have some kinship with the Mariner, unable to gab to his co-workers about the nightmare around him.

THE WEDDING GUEST

He's a man of some standing, minding his own business, looking forward to his kin's wedding feast. He's probably wearing his nicest clothes, and he's planning on seeing people he hasn't seen for some time. He is about to enter the wedding hall with two friends when suddenly a bedraggled old man stops him.

He tries to get away, first by appealing to this graybeard's sense of decency: “The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide/And I am next of kin; The guests are met, the feast is set: May'st hear the



merry din" (Coleridge, 1834). His friends, suddenly, are beyond the threshold and in the hall; that tells us that he perhaps is more respected than loved. He's alone with this nut. "There was a ship," the nut says, as he holds him with a hand (Coleridge, 1834). He asks the old man, a bit less-than-politely, to move his hand, which the old man does, but then he just *looks* at the Wedding Guest, who now can't move. At all. He's forced to hear a long convoluted story in which an albatross and then 200 men die, and the Mariner sees spirits inhabit human bodies. Then the ship implodes.

And the Mariner tells him he's bound to tell this story because he sees something in his face. The implication being, he's got a lesson to learn, about being nice to everyone, since apparently he isn't already.

This might be why he rises the next day "a sadder and wiser man."

After his initial protests, the Wedding Guest is actually a great ombuds. He "listens like a three years' child," rather patiently, to the entire story. At times, he makes observations that help the Mariner advance his story. For example, the Mariner describes the Albatross flying alongside the ship and perching on its mast or shroud "for vespers nine," while the moon shines, then stops. The Wedding Guest finally speaks: "God save thee, ancient Mariner! From the fiends, that plague thee thus! Why look'st thou so?" (Coleridge, 1834) In other words, he notices his distress and prompts him to continue his narrative.

The mariner answers that, "with my cross-bow/I shot the ALBATROSS" (Coleridge, 1834). Another listener might have questioned this development. What compelled the Mariner to kill a pleasant bird who was apparently popular with his crew? He doesn't ask, and the Mariner never says. We can guess: jealousy, boredom, target practice? The Wedding Guest is being a good ombuds by not pestering the Mariner for the reason why. The act speaks for itself, in all its senselessness. The Wedding Guest is further being a good ombuds by not rushing the Mariner, by waiting until he is ready to offer a full explanation.

Granted, twice he does stop the Mariner to say that he's afraid of him—the Mariner reassures him by affirming that he is not dead. For the most part, though, the Wedding Guest is a good listener, who prods the Mariner at the one point when he can't admit his deed. Some ombuds might have done worse, not resisting the urge to interject when the Mariner just needs to tell his story. More than that, the Wedding Guest shares with the ombuds the compulsion to listen to the story of a stranger. We get the feeling the Guest isn't prepared to hear this nightmare tale of death, loneliness, and penance, but he listens anyway. What's more, he internalizes what the Mariner tells him. This chance encounter completely changes his worldview; at the end of the poem, he still hasn't quite processed what he has heard. And how often does that happen, that we hear something that sticks with us, for good or bad? It could be a visitor shedding a past trauma or current triumph. In either case, while we can hold space while visitors process their conflict, we can't pretend that we can empty ourselves of what we hear.

The poem ends with the Wedding Guest turning from the door of the feast, where everyone is having such an unrestrainedly good time that the din can be heard outside, like someone who has been stunned, only to wake up the next morning sadder and wiser. Is it a cautionary tale for all those who listen? The Wedding Guest warns us: when you're compelled to listen, be aware of the toll it will exact on you. You might miss more than happy hour.

THE SHIPMATES

The Mariner's crew are a fickle bunch. They love the bird flying with them; it seems to bring a good south wind that might get them home. Then the Mariner shoots it. "Wretch!" they say. Why



did you kill the bird that made the breeze blow? But then the sun then comes up, and they change their tune. "Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, That bring the fog and mist" (Coleridge, 1834).

Before long, the crew will pay the ultimate price for their sin. But what was that sin? It's their exclusively pragmatic view of life. If the bird is useful, the Mariner shouldn't kill it; but if it turns out that the Albatross is responsible for all of that moody fog, well, it got what was coming to it. No sooner has the crew toasted the Mariner for killing the bird than the ship is becalmed at the equator. No breeze, no rain, no motion. Surrounded by water, dying of thirst. So parched, they can't speak, but they're all giving the Mariner the dirtiest of looks. And they hang the Albatross around his neck.

After that, the 200 shipmates don't do much besides be parched, give the Mariner accusatory looks, and, when Death shows up, die.

None of that is in any ombuds' job description, and we can be rightfully annoyed at the shipmates' soulless utilitarianism. They are willing to condone the murder of a helpful bird if it means they can work on their tans again. Once the spirit nine fathoms down gives them their just desserts, though, they change their tune, now blaming only the Mariner, without showing any self-awareness.

But the shipmates, in death, do something that a skilled ombuds can do in life: they hold a mirror up to the Mariner. He describes the dead lying at his feet:

The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
Nor rot nor reek did they:
The look with which they looked on me
Had never passed away.

An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die (Coleridge, 1834).

Not decaying, the Shipmates remind the Mariner of his sin. Without having to say anything at all, they force the Mariner to reflect on what he has done and what he will do next. While the curse in a dead man's eye might be one way of doing that, an ombuds might simply repeat and possibly reframe what the visitor has told them, offering that same space for self-reflection that begins moving the Mariner towards his penance.

All of which is a long-winded way of saying that you don't have to say much to have an impact. And sometimes, the less you say, the more the visitor thinks—a fitting lesson for an ombuds.

THE ALBATROSS

It doesn't know why, but it's drawn to that noisy wooden ship. It gets lonely out in the cold ocean. Now there are a bunch of talking, laughing humans here. They offer it food and good cheer. So the Albatross follows them, proud, in its own way, of the sailors it has adopted.

Then one of them shoots it.



The Albatross doesn't do much in Coleridge's poem except be friendly and die, though it stands as a symbol, first of unconditional sociability, then the Mariner's guilt. Even if you haven't read the poem, you may have heard the odd phrase "albatross around one's neck," usually meaning a burden that one must endure. But that's not entirely true to the poem, where the Albatross isn't foisted on the Mariner arbitrarily. He is forced to wear the dead bird as a punishment for his crime. And, in the poem, the reader can sense that he doesn't argue the point. After all, he continues to wear the bird carcass even after all his shipmates are dead.

Indeed, after he is left alone, the Mariner spends an entire week soaking in the curse in his dead crew's eyes, lugging the Albatross across the deck. He somehow knows that he can't subtract this burden himself.

It isn't until the Mariner unconsciously blesses the water-snakes that he can pray. At that moment, his guilty deadweight is lifted: "And from my neck so free/The Albatross fell of, and sank/Like lead into the sea" (Coleridge, 1834).

Like the dead Shipmates, the Albatross holds a mirror to the Mariner, forcing him to think and rethink his actions. It is far from a comfortable obligation to carry, but a necessary one. An ombuds could play the same role, reminding the visitor of their responsibilities to themselves and others, or simply asking questions that allow them to think about what they really want.

THE HERMIT

He shows up late in the poem, gets some backstory, and asks one question of the Mariner, but the Hermit is essential to the *Rime*, and a positive model for an ombuds. The narrator tells the reader that the "Hermit good" lives in the wood, has a loud, sweet voice, and likes to talk with sailors from all over. When he's not schmoozing, he kneels (and presumably prays) on a mossy, rotted oak stump. He and the Pilot see the strange lights on the harbor (the spirits inhabiting the Shipmates abandoning their bodies) and investigate. The Pilot confesses that he is "a-feared" of approaching such a ghastly ship, but the Hermit cheerily urges him to "push on" (Coleridge, 1834).

The Hermit, the Pilot, and the Pilot's son see the Mariner's ship sink like lead beneath the wave, then fish the Mariner out of the brine. The Pilot and his son are so terrified of this apparition come to life that they are unable to meaningfully engage; the Hermit can only pray. The Mariner takes the oars himself, steers the boat to shore, and disembarks.

Then the Mariner, seeing the Hermit follow him onto shore, begs: "O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!" (Coleridge, 1834) An explanation: "shrieve" is an archaic version of "[shrive](#)," a curiously two-directional word which means alternately to impose penance on the unrepentant or to grant absolution to penitents. Likewise, it means both hearing and making confessions. The Mariner is looking for someone else to tell him that he is saved, or to tell him what he needs to do to be saved.

But the Hermit does neither. Instead, he crosses himself, and asks that the Mariner reveal "What manner of man art thou?" (Coleridge, 1834)

That simple question is all it takes. The Mariner's body is wracked as he begins his tale. He shares every word. Though painful, the telling is liberating, ending his agony: "And then it left me free" (Coleridge, 1834)

All the Hermit had to do was ask a question, then be silent. The Mariner was the agent of his own salvation. That might be the most efficient and effective ombudsing in the poem, and perhaps



something familiar to us in our own practice. Haven't there been times where you've just asked, "Tell me about yourself," and the visitor took it from there? Sure, they weren't supernaturally compelled to share a compact narrative of sin, regret, and penance, but by telling you their story, they understood something new about it and saw a different way forward. That might be the closest secular equivalent to the Hermit's presence.

THE SUPERNATURAL

The *Rime* is unabashedly Christian, with the Mariner's best and highest purpose walking to church and praying with friends. While the Mariner's journey is ostensibly an earthly one—he sails from England to the equator to the Antarctic, back to the equator, then back to England—Coleridge preserves a slice of pre-Enlightenment wonder in his increasingly mapped and rational world. Spiritual beings play a crucial but indirect role in the narrative.

First, a mysterious spirit "nine fathom" (54 feet) below the surface apparently plagues the Mariner and crew after the Albatross's death, appearing to some in dreams. He has followed them from the Antarctic oceans. While the poem only says that this spirit has followed the ship, later, after the Mariner's penance begins and the ship moves again, it's revealed that the same spirit is making the ship move again. It's likely, then, that he stopped it in the first place. So this spirit has a motive and a message—it's just up to the sailors to figure it out.

Another set of spirits inhabits the Shipmates' corpses. Not speaking, not shifting their eyes, they move their limbs "like lifeless tools." The Mariner explicitly says that these are not the spirits of those who have died, but rather "a troop of spirits blest." Angels. They don't speak to the Mariner at all, and serve only to crew the ship on its voyage home (Coleridge, 1834).

In Part VI of the poem, the Mariner overhears two disembodied spirits fill the reader in on some details about how the ship is moving so quickly. These, alone of all the spirits in the poem, vocalize their thoughts, although they don't speak directly to the Mariner, who only hears them while in a trance.

God is curiously absent from the *Rime*. The Shipmates hail the Albatross "in God's name." After the Mariner kills the Albatross, the sun rises "nor dim nor red, like God's own head." And yet the Mariner, when he finally can pray, does not plead for God to save him; instead, he blesses the water-snakes. The Mariner only calls to God when he believes he is back in his own country, praying that, if he's not awake, God let him continue to sleep. This is a conscious absence. The Mariner tells the Wedding Guest that he has been so lonely that, "God himself/Scarce seemed there to be" (Coleridge, 1834).

The spirits in the *Rime* are powerful: they can start and stop winds and waves, inhabit human bodies, and know the unknowable. But they can't it seems, speak directly to humans. In a sense, the organizational ombuds practicing to standards shares this odd voicelessness. They may be privy to knowledge hidden to others, but because of confidentiality, they cannot reveal it. While they can discuss options, clarify policies, and share skills with visitors, they can't speak for the visitor, and they can't intervene directly in a conflict. Nor will they tell a visitor what they "should" do, limited to instead discussing what they *might* do. Just like the various spirits need the Mariner to make the connections to redeem himself and then spread word of his revelation, ombuds must allow their visitors to act with agency.

SWEETER FAR TO ME

Explicitly, the core message of the *Rime* is universal love. The Mariner's last words to the Wedding Guest are instructive:



He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all (Coleridge, 1834).

And the Mariner's unconscious act of empathy, seeing beauty in the previously loathsome water-snakes, begins his salvation. In other words, don't be like the Shipmates and only love conditionally—if someone makes the wind blow, or dispels the fog and mist—but love unconditionally, even the unbeautiful.

Universal love seems to be a very ombuds-friendly message. Our professional standards require us to be neutral and impartial, treating all visitors with the same respect, not favoring one over the other. It is easy to see that the best possible ombuds is the one who genuinely likes all of their visitors and wants them to find their best outcome. Even those who we know have hurt others have a claim on our empathy simply because they are part of the population we serve. Of course, while that sounds great on paper, it can be a difficult message to live up to. Sure, reading it now you feel confident that you love everyone unconditionally, but what happens when some jerk cuts you off in traffic? What about the supervisor who makes you so anxious you can't sleep? Or the colleague who seems to be constantly undermining you? It's easy to love friendly birds and glittery water snakes and people we share a faith in God with, but what about people who don't seem to love us back?

Further, as a practicing ombuds, using the language of the *Rime* to urge empathy is probably inadvisable, given that it says we need to love everyone because God loves everyone. But what if one doesn't believe in God? And telling a visitor they need to open their hearts to their perceived oppressor might not be the message they need to hear. After all, they probably have come to you with a narrative of how others have wronged them. Telling them to answer hostility with love might lead the visitor to question how much you have really understood them.

Perhaps the best frame for the Mariner's instruction is to shift from love to empathy. Don't mention love, don't mention God; instead, take to heart the deeper meaning of what the Mariner has said. Albatrosses and water-snakes are living creatures just like us, who have as much right to life and who, in their own way, have their own aspirations. Recognizing that others are like us can be the first step to understanding why they act the way they act. That is the kind of insight that an ombuds can helpfully pass on to a visitor.

There is another cautionary note for the sole practitioner ombuds in the Mariner's message, though. For the Mariner, it is only in pious fellowship with others—walking to church, praying—that one can be close to God and feel at peace. To really be happy, Coleridge says, one can't live away from others. One must be together with them. Even the Hermit, whose job is literally to live a solitary, withdrawn life, spends a lot of time chatting, which is all well and good when you are just another villager, but not so handy when the core standards of your job require you to hold yourself aloof from those you work around.

But our work is not our life. Maybe that is the Mariner's message for ombuds: while we all spend time alone on the wide wide sea, we also need to spend time with others. Hang out with family and friends. Go to a concert. Go to a game. Connect with others, because too much time alone is difficult. Maybe, like the Mariner, you're an introvert who doesn't love parties. There are other outlets. For him it was praying. For you it might be yoga, grappling, competitive eating—wherever you find genuine companionship.



CONCLUSION: SADDER AND WISER

So we've got to treat others with empathy and find like-minded souls to keep us grounded and happy. Seems straightforward enough. It's an optimistic, maybe even dopey message; "All You Need Is Love" a century-and-a-half before the Beatles. But the poem ends on a real downer. The Wedding Guest, instead of being energized by the Mariner's wisdom, is depressed. He stumbles away from the bridegroom's door stunned, almost in a trance, and wakes up "sadder and wiser" the next morning (Coleridge, 1834).

Why?

First, let's make some charitable assumptions about the Wedding Guest. He's something of an extrovert, since he didn't welcome the Mariner's diversion. So he likes people, thinks they are basically decent, even if he is a bit quick with the insults when the "greybeard loon" holds him up. Then he hears a story about a guy murdering a bird for no reason, about 200 people giving him a pass because the sun came out, and realized just how big, cruel, and empty the world can be. The planet isn't filled with basically happy people, but with real loneliness and misanthropy. This knowledge makes him sad.

Another interpretation might be that the Mariner holds a mirror up to the Wedding Guest, who sees his own life bereft of empathy. A life that seemed so rich as he was ready to enter the wedding hall is suddenly empty. The Wedding Guest has spent too much time chasing the wrong things. With a few words, that bright-eyed old sailor turned the Wedding Guest's life upside down. It's no wonder that he's in no mood to thank the Mariner. The Wedding Guest doesn't see a happier future ahead, just the wasted years behind him.

Yeah, you might say, learning that you've been on the wrong track is a bummer, but the Wedding Guest is young enough to turn things around, so he should be happy. After all, he's just had an eyewitness account of the spirit world, of a hidden but present judge of all creation who rewards those who keep to the true path. If he takes the Mariner at his word, he has more proof of a life beyond this one than even a saint. Purged of any doubt, he just needs to pray with an expanding circle of friends to be assured of a peaceful heart and, presumably, a place in heaven. But that is still, somehow, distressing to him.

As ombuds, we should consider the Wedding Guest's curious response to the Mariner's revelation. For many of our visitors, even good news, whether it is a policy clarification, or their own insight prodded by the ombuds' questions, can be bad news. Learning that there is a way out comes with the realization that it isn't an easy way out, and that the visitor won't get there without some heavy lifting. To us, standing outside their life, clarity seems like a gift; on the inside, though, it may feel like a curse. We may need to be sensitive to how our visitors process the information they discuss with us, and how they will feel when they wake up the next morning. We should never leave them, stunned, at the door.

One final thought: maybe the Wedding Guest is sadder and wiser because he realizes that, as compelling a speaker as the Mariner is, he is insane. Ocean spirits? Angels inhabiting bodies and launching a fireworks show? Death shooting craps with a strange blonde? Sounds like a sea voyage wasn't the only trip this Mariner was on. He buys into the story—so much that he begs the Mariner to stop twice, terrified—but after it's over he realizes it makes no sense in a rational world. He's missed the wedding for nothing. Grey-bearded wanderers have no valuable life lessons to share, no wisdom they have gleaned from their travels: they are just nuts. Which is a mood that an ombuds can relate to, since not every visitor is a disinterested or reliable narrator. Sometimes, they tell a story so perfect that they themselves almost believe it.



Sometimes, you might know for a fact that they are making misrepresentations. The distance and loneliness that sets in is real. If we could only be honest with each other, you might think, we could be happy. But this visitor is more interested in telling a story with themselves as the victim and hero than considering how they can understand others and be understood. The conflict continues. Learning just how dishonest or deluded others can be is enough to put a damper on your morning.

So, after all that, where is the ombuds in the *Rime*? As in any organization, potentially everywhere. Ombuds can learn much from a poem that is, fundamentally, about how people relate to each other, particularly to those who have less power than them. We can see the Mariner's commitment to teaching empathy, the Hermit's thoughtful listening, the Wedding Guest's willingness to learn, the Albatross's reminder, and even the Shipmates' mirroring of the Mariner's guilt, and see ourselves. Most importantly, this poem demonstrates how truly awful solitude can be—the Mariner never feels as alone as when he has no one to talk to. We don't need to have pithy insights like the Mariner to be valuable. We don't need to be radiant like the troop of angels. We certainly don't need to defy the laws of nature like the nine-fathom spirit. It might be enough that we, like the water snakes, be there with our visitors, letting them work out what they need to work out, assured they are no longer alone.



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