

criticism of life, the facts of human nature; yet as these are, and largely as they may contribute to our pleasure, they are not themselves necessarily poetical, and cannot of themselves give poetic excellence to the work which contains them. Or again, poetry may be great because it profoundly stirs our sympathies; but then it must deal with what comes within the range of familiar experience. Now, the theme of *The Ancient Mariner* is like the theme of a fairy tale,—so remote in its incidents from reality, that it appeals but little to our sense of truth, and cannot intensely excite our emotional nature. Hence to those who lack the special ear for the essentially poetical, this poem is likely to seem trivial; whilst those, who spite of the little value they are disposed consciously to put upon artistic charm, are yet captivated by the beauty of this poem, often seek to justify their preference by alleging the existence of an allegorical meaning or a moral lesson.* Such attempts to force a deeper significance upon *The Ancient Mariner*, are really destructive of its main strength, which is æsthetic, and lies in its artistic consistency and unity—in its perfect harmony, beauty and completeness, if regarded from its own point of view. To enjoy it we must follow Coleridge's own critical method:—take it for what, on the face of it, it is; and not mar our satisfaction and its beauty by attempting to thrust it into a sphere (even if that be a higher one) to which it does not properly belong.

Its Fundamental Character.—"The *Ancient Mariner*," says Pater, "is a 'romantic' poem, impressing us by bold invention, and appealing to that taste for the supernatural, that longing for a *shudder*, to which the romantic school in Germany, and its derivatives in France and England, directly ministered." Fundamentally, then, this poem is a story addressed to the universal taste for the marvellous and weird, strongest in children and in the primitive stages of society, yet inherent, though it may be overlaid, in more mature minds and more enlightened ages. At the date of its composition, there was an extra-

* In his *Table Talk* Coleridge is reported as saying: "Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired *The Ancient Mariner* very much, but that there were two faults in it,—it was improbable, and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genii starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant, because one of the date-shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genii's son." (*Table Talk*, May 31, 1830.)