“The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” by Samuel Coleridge is inspired by the tales of sea faring adventurers and their run-ins with the supernatural. His use of archaic language like rime, ancyent, wist, and many others gives the poem a feeling of being pulled out of the depths of the sea itself. It is an additional way of separating the speaker and the audience through time and space to enhance the mythical, fairy tale-like aspects of the Marinere’s required tale. As the poem progresses, the Marinere is the only one who speaks in this way. His verbiage is just another way in which the Marinere becomes one of these supernatural characters of the sea. When he does return to land, he is no longer part of this land. He is something other; he is the supernatural and the everyday coming together. This otherness, this separation from the world we know and the one we can’t begin to understand, is highlighted in this poem’s form as well as the content.

The sudden appearance of gambling ghosts is not the only interesting thing about the third part of this seven-part poem. For the first time in the poem we see the poet start to bend the more traditional rules of the ballad measure format. While Coleridge begins to play with the rhyme scheme here as well, the most notable deviation is moving from the traditional four-line stanzas to five or six-line stanzas. Up until this point, the Anycent Marinere has read very much like a poem, but in part three, when the action and supernatural side begin to emerge, it starts to read more like a narrative with these five or six-line stanzas. It is similar to the climax of a story; the shift in length and the spacing of the rhymes causes the reader (and listener, in this
case) to really start to pay attention. Meeting the ghostly gamblers is the point in the poem when things will begin to fall apart, and the very Marinere himself will start to change from this point forward. In the rest of the poem, this change is continuously reflected in the use of these lengthier stanzas as the tensions continue to grow. And we won’t see it return to the normal four-lines until we are brought back to the present as one of the wedding guests speaks. So, in a way, Coleridge uses these lengthier stanzas to not only make it read more like a narrative, but to highlight the more supernatural elements of the poem. These moves, combined with the changing rhyme schemes, only increase the tension and chaos brewing in the poem.

While the traditional rhyme scheme for a ballad is ABCB, Coleridge adjusts the rhyme scheme to make the chaos of this particular section even more evident. The first stanza, for example, follows a rhyme scheme of ABCBDB; stanzas three and four follow a similar scheme of ABCCB; while the sixth stanza has no rhyme at all aside from the repetition of the word Sun. This ever-changing rhyme scheme keeps the reader on their toes and enhances the chaos and terror of the ghost ships arrival. It is as if the poet himself was so overwhelmed by the horrific chaos of the situation that traditional forms and schemes no longer mattered. However, his use of internal rhymes, like, “A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist” (145), and assonance, “the western wave was all a flame” (163), quicken the reading. These quick, familiar sounds heighten the tension as it forces the reader to read quicker, which creates an interesting parallel to the occasional changes in the rhyme scheme. Moving away from the traditional to an uncanny replicate of a ballad creates a reflection of the experience of the Marinere in the form of the poem. This tension is crucial for the reveal of the terrifying, yet somewhat alluring, figures of death and death-in-life which gamble for the crew.
The moribund crew and the Marinere see a ship on the horizon, but their hopeful salvation will soon become their reaper. Continuing with the themes of the supernatural, rituals and sacrifices are vital to summoning most of these beings. To get the ship’s attention, “I bit my arm and suck’d the blood/ and cry’d, A sail! A sail” (152-153). In order to satiate his body enough to call out, he has to drink his own blood to quench his thirst. It isn’t until this blood sacrifice is made that the ghost ship will turn its attention to the desperate crew. It is ironic that this desperate move to save his own life and those of his men is, ultimately, the choice that will end their lives. However, as the ship blots out the sun and defies nature itself by moving without the wind, it becomes clear that a mistake has been made. An aside is made in line 170, “Heaven’s mother send us grace,” as the mistake is realized; but by this point it is too late because the deal has already been struck. Arguably, this bloodletting is the very moment when the Marinere unknowingly steps into the realm of the supernatural and away from the intimacy of his own spirituality. This small step evolves into a forceful shove as the male and female figure upon the ghost ship play their eternal game.

Surprisingly, the poem doesn’t allocate much time or effort in describing the male character aboard the ship. This sort of personification of death is one that can be expected: black, broken bones, empty eye sockets, and covered in mold and crust (181-185). Needless to say, definitely not the most alluring of supernatural creatures. However, death is death. Coleridge doesn’t waste time trying to push this issue of death because this is a fate all of us will share. However, as Death gambles for and loses the Marinere’s soul, the poet forces the audience’s attention to the most horrifying thing of all. The one thing that we should all truly be afraid of: death-in-life.
The female specter’s contrasting appearance is used to make a statement about death-in-life. To begin, this idea of death-in-life is a sort of living death; a life that is lived without purpose or satisfaction. And Coleridge personifies her in the following way, “Her lips are red, her looks are free/ Her locks are yellow as gold:/ Her skin is white as leprosy” (186-1867). She’s beautifully alluring (especially compared to her ghastly companion), but this is the very thing that makes her so dangerous. It’s easy to fall into the trap of an everyday life that is unrewarding and prohibits one from growing as a person. On the surface, things appear fine—they may even appear beautifully. But upon closer inspection, it isn’t hard to see the signs of the death of the soul. And that is scariest part of it all. With a dead soul, with a purposeless soul, the body is left to wander aimlessly, hoping for death’s sweet kiss. In this way, not only because she actually wins, we see the way death-in-life holds a power over death. In fact, it seems like this great power is the only thing stronger than power and influence of death. Some wish for death, but no one wishes for a meaningless life.

As this section of the poem comes to a close, we see the stanzas jump back to the expected quatrains of a ballad, and we can see this as a jump back to reality. It is hard to ignore the aside reminding the listener to pay attention, and it is even harder to ignore how the change in style accompanies it (205). To me, out of all the darkness in this section of the poem, the Marinere wishes to leave the audience with the most important image: the death of his crew. While the Marinere is won by death-in-life and forced to live in a repetitious cycle, his crew is claimed by the figure of death. This culling of souls cannot help but be reflected against the Marinere’s mindless killing of the Albatross in the very beginning. It finishes with, “They fled to bliss or woe;/ and every soul it pass’d me by,/ Like the whiz of my Cross-bow” (213-215).
Every soul that flees the ship is a reminder of how all of this is the Marinere’s fault. Whether it begins with the thoughtless killing of an innocent creature or his accidental blood oath to save the life of his crew, they are here because of him. And what punishment could be worse than having to tell the story of your own failure over and over again.