

# THE INCHCAPE ROCK

The Inchcape Rock by Robert Southey is a **ballad** that tells us about the legends of the Inchcape Rock, a reef in the North Sea about 18 km off the east coast of Angus, Scotland.

The story is about the good Abbot of Aberbrothok and the devilish Sir Ralph the Rover. The Abbot achieved the great feat of installing a bell on the dangerous Inchcape rock that had previously caused many shipwrecks. His bell rang during the storms and issued an alert for the passing ships. So, the seamen knew where the rock is and could avoid the danger of an accident. They blessed the Abbot for his good work.

But it was the Rover who felt jealous at the fame of the Abbot and planned to cut down the bell from the Inchcape rock. And so he did. This Ralph the Rover was actually a sea-pirate. So he needed to destroy the bell to accomplish his desire to rob more ships by putting them in danger. But finally he himself was the victim of the Inchcape rock. One day his ship was left in the midst of storms, lost the direction and crashed against the rock. Thus the Rover was punished for his sinful work.

Here the poet Robert Southey delivers a **message** through his poem: **As you sow, so shall you reap**. So the poem The Inchcape Rock is **didactic** in nature like most of Southey's poems.

The poem is a bit long as the ballads should be. It consists of seventeen stanzas of four lines each. The first two and the last two lines of each stanza rhyme with each other. The rhyme scheme is AABB for each stanza.

## The Inchcape Rock: Stanza-wise Summary & Explanation

In the first stanza of the poem the poet describes the calmness of the sea. The air, the sea, the ship – all were still. The sails of the ship were getting no motion from the wind. Its keel was steady in the ocean.

The second stanza describes the mild sea waves. The waves were rising and falling so little that they did not make any sign or sound. The waves were gently flowing over the Inchcape Rock without moving or ringing the bell.

The third stanza is about the bell. The 'good old Abbot of Aberbrothok' positioned the Inchcape bell there on the Inchcape Rock. During the storms it floated on a buoy and rang wildly swung by the high tides to alert everyone that the dangerous rock was there.

In the next four lines, the poet tells us how the bell guided the mariners in the bad weather. The seamen could not see the Rock as it stayed hidden under the high waves during the storms. But they could hear the ringing bell and went away from the perilous (dangerous) rock. So the bell saved their lives. Then the seafarers blessed the Abbot for his good job.

The fifth stanza delivers a cheerful atmosphere, as it generally happens before every disaster. On a particular bright day everything looked joyful. The sea-birds were whirling over the sea and screaming in joy.

In the sixth stanza of the poem Sir Ralph is introduced for the first time. On that fine day, the buoy (an anchored floating sign to show the reef) on the Inchcape Rock was clearly visible, as it was a blackish spot in the green ocean. Sir Ralph the Rover went onto the deck of his vessel and gazed at dark spot of the buoy.

The next stanza deals with Ralph's feelings and thoughts. He was delighted at the good spring atmosphere. He was making whistling sounds and singing in joy. He was actually overjoyed. But no one knew that a sinful thought in his mind was behind this happiness.

In the eighth stanza the Rover himself speaks and reveals his desire. His eyes were fixed on the floating buoy on the Inchcape Rock. Sir Ralph the Rover ordered his crew to take the boat to the Inchcape Rock. Then he says that he is going to plague (kill or destroy) the good work of the Abbot of Aberbrothok.

The ninth stanza describes that the Rover's men took the boat to the Inchcape Rock. There he bent over the boat and cut the bell from the Rock.

The next stanza pictures how the bell was sinking down making the bubbling sound. Bubbles rose and burst around. Sir Ralph was happy thinking that the bell would save no more ships and the seamen would no longer bless the Abbot.

Sir Ralph the Rover then sailed away from the rock. Thereafter he had robbed and looted many ships which met accidents crashing to the Inchcape Rock. He is now a rich man with all the looted treasures. And today he is going to the Scotland shore with his ship.

The twelfth stanza describes the gloomy atmosphere on the day the Rover is sailing to Scotland. The sun is hidden behind the thick fog. Strong winds were blowing all the day, and now, in the evening it has stopped blowing.

The next four lines continues the gloom. The Rover is now on the deck of his ship. They can't see land as it is very dark. Sir Ralph assures that the moon will appear soon and so there will be light.

In the fourteenth stanza one of Ralph's men says that he hears the roaring sound of the waves breaking against something. So, he hopes they should be near the shore. He also regrets that the Inchcape Bell is no more, as it could guide them in this situation.

But no sound was there. The tides were strong. The Rover and his team are drifting along with the ship. Suddenly the vessel gets a jerking. They all realize that the vessel has hit the Inchcape Rock.

Sir Ralph the Rover pulls his hairs in frustration. He curses himself for his evil deeds. Meanwhile the water fills in every corner of the vessel and it starts sinking in the sea.

In the last stanza of the poem as the Rover is dying, he hears a sound like the ringing of the Inchcape Bell. It was actually his death knell that the Devil himself was ringing beneath the water.

Thus the Rover gets punishment for his sinful works. Robert Southey is a poet who always delivers a teaching through his poems. This too is not an exception.