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## **CHRISTABEL**

### **(A) Gothic Sublime in Coleridge's Christabel**

While Wordsworth's contributions to the Lyrical Ballads focused on rustic life, Coleridge turned to the Gothic. Coleridge admired the Gothic mind and believed that it was capable of greater emotion and wisdom than that of his contemporaries. The narrator of Christabel provides the poem with a Gothic aesthetic, which fits within Burke's definition of the sublime. The Gothic elements of Christabel have been criticized by Andrew Cooper, who interprets them as a parody of Gothic conventions and reduces the narrator to just another "gothic gimmick." Coleridge's exploration of the Gothic mind is also an invitation to the reader to adopt a mental state similar to that of the characters in Christabel, as only a Gothic mind can properly enjoy such a poem. Christabel both displays the heightened level of sensation of which the Gothic mind was capable, and encourages its reader to embrace this Gothic mentality.

In the eighteenth century, the term "Goths" referred to Germanic tribes (including the Angles and the Saxons who settled in England) who overthrew the Roman Empire and it also was applied medieval English architecture, which differed from continental styles. Although several negative reviews of eighteenth century Gothic fiction have been attributed to him, Coleridge valued the power of Gothic literature from the Middle Ages. The Gothic world, for Coleridge, was chronologically broad, as it included King Alfred, who ruled England over four hundred years after the Germanic tribes sacked Rome. Coleridge's thoughts on the Gothic appear in two lectures that he delivered in 1818, just two years after the publication of Christabel. Gothic art "depended on a symbolic expression of the infinite," which Coleridge defined as "whatever cannot be circumscribed within the limits of actual sensuous being." Coleridge states "Gothic architecture impresses the beholder with a sense of self-annihilation; he becomes, as it were, a part of the work contemplated." Coleridge's experience with Gothic architecture is identical to Burke's description of the sublime.



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Michael Gamer notes that Wordsworth cut Christabel from the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads because the Gothic poems in the 1798 edition received negative reviews and Wordsworth feared that the Gothic nature of Christabel would prompt similar reviews in 1800. Coleridge understood his role in the Lyrical Ballads as preparing poems on the supernatural that illustrated “the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real”. The Gothic world was the ideal setting for such poems, as the Goths, according to Coleridge, were free from the skepticism that infected the Greeks. Although his poems depicted the supernatural, Coleridge believed that his audience could suspend their disbelief, as he “transfer [red] from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth.” Coleridge’s reference to “inward nature” suggests that the Gothic mind still remained within his contemporaries, and his poems sought to raise this old mentality to the surface.

The key figure in Christabel for understanding the mind of England’s ancestors is the narrator, who is both a Gothic character and a rhetorical tool that Coleridge employs to induce a sublime response in his readers. Christabel’s confused narrator and his questions illustrate what Wolfson calls “a restless play of possibilities,” as they prime the reader for the Gothic experience of the poem. The questions in Christabel begin almost immediately: “Is the Night chilly and dark?”; “What makes her [Christabel] in the Wood so late, / A furlong from the Castle Gate?” In the case of these first two questions, the narrator proceeds to provide answers; however, simply by asking a question, the narrator implies that there is a degree of uncertainty about what is happening in the story. A lack of clarity can, as Burke points out, enhance the passions: “a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions”.

The narrator initially wonders: “Is it the Wind that moaneth bleak?” This explanation, however, cannot be true, as the narrator admits: “There is not Wind enough in the Air / To move away the ringlet Curl / From the lovely Lady’s Cheek”. The source of the moan is Geraldine, but this fact is not revealed until line sixty, which is fourteen lines after the narrator suggests that the wind made the sound, and twenty-one lines after Christabel leaps from the shock of the noise. This delay keeps the reader



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in an uncertain state for a longer period. The extended feeling of suspense is connected to Christabel's proximity to Geraldine, foreshadowing the growing sense of mystery that Geraldine's character will bring to the poem.

Coleridge noted that the Gothic mind "derived satisfaction from what which was indistinct." The narrator's inability to explain the events gives the poem an indistinct quality. We see such kind of instances when Christabel and Geraldine enter the castle and the dog barks, the narrator wonders:

And what can ail the Mastiff Bitch?  
Never till now she utter'd  
Yell Beneath the eye of Christabel.  
Perhaps it is the Owlet's Scritch:  
For what can ail the Mastiff Bitch?"

Here, the narrator provides an explanation for the dog barking (the noise of owlets), but he seems unconvinced. Throughout the poem, the narrator frequently interjects with expressions of fear. There are numerous question and exclamation marks in Christabel, and each one contributes to the poem a gothic quality. There are many moments when the narrator breaks off from telling the story in order to pray for the divine protection of Christabel. The first such instance occurs early in the poem. When Christabel is looking around the oak tree, but before she sees Geraldine, the narrator exclaims: "Jesu Maria, shield her well!" The narrator does not yet know what is behind the tree, but as a Gothic character, his mind is stimulated by the indistinct. Although he makes it clear that Christabel is in danger, the narrator cannot articulate what exactly the danger is. The situation is terrifying precisely because it is unknown. As a result, the reader feels a sense of Gothic terror similar to that of the narrator.

The gothic sublimity appears throughout the poem, through the character, Geraldine. The key moment is the night that Christabel spends with Geraldine, but before the two women reach Christabel's bedroom the narrator is already evoking the sublime when describing both the setting and Geraldine. The journey to Christabel's



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bedroom has all the features of obscurity and the Gothic aesthetic. As Christabel and Geraldine approach Christabel's room, the hall "echoes still / Pass as lightly as you will". The two women walk "Now in Glimmer, and now in Gloom". With these lines, Coleridge creates an obscure atmosphere and feeling of unease. Mysterious occurrences continue when they pass a fireplace where the fire has died out and "there came / A Tongue of Light, a Fit of Flame". When Geraldine appears to be speaking to the spirit of Christabel's dead mother, the narrator wonders: "what ails poor Geraldine? / Why stares she with unsettled Eye? / Can she the bodiless Dead espy?" The narrator cannot understand Geraldine's behavior and is forced to consider a supernatural explanation, which is beyond human comprehension and terrifying.

According to Burke, the obscurity of night "adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds, which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings" (43). After Geraldine undresses, the narrator conveys the horror of seeing Geraldine's naked body: "Behold! her Bosom, and half her Side – / A Sight to dream of, not to tell!". The sight of Geraldine's body is so shocking that the narrator cannot even describe it. The unknown quality of Geraldine enhances her sublimity. According to Burke, "it is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions". When she is in bed with Christabel, Geraldine uses the power of touch to absorb Christabel: "In the Touch of this Bosom there worketh a Spell, / Which is Lord of thy Utterance, Christabel!". This "spell" represents the gothic sublimity in the poem.

Lacking completion, an unfinished poem, such as Christabel, becomes infinite. It is not restricted the words on the page, but expands into the reader's imagination, capable to taking on any form. Coleridge described the sense of satisfaction when beholding infinity, and linked it to the Gothic art of the Middle Ages. The Gothic mind, according to Coleridge, has a "tendency toward the infinite, so that he found rest in that which presented no end." Coleridge claimed that he intended to write three additional parts for the poem, but he still elected to publish it in its unfinished form in 1816, two years before his lectures on Gothic art and its use of infinity. What is certain is that in its



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current form, Christabel is a poem of infinite possibilities that requires the reader to adopt the Gothic mindset in order to appreciate the poem's infinity.

### **(B) Sexual Initiation in Coleridge's "Christabel"**

"Christabel" traces its heroine's attempt to come to terms with her sexuality, to recognize its essential role in her love for her absent knight and in their approaching marriage, and to progress from adolescence to womanhood. Geraldine is the projection of that sexuality, with its desire, fear, shame, and pleasure. The "witchcraft" that makes her beautiful or ugly, inviting or menacing, depends on Christabel's changing attitude toward herself. In Christabel's dreams, Geraldine is the woman she at once yearns and fears to become. Much of the poem's suspense arises from the question of whether Christabel will expel her unconscious fantasies by acting them out with Geraldine or whether these fantasies will destroy her.

Christabel first meets Geraldine in a sexually charged atmosphere. It is early spring, a time of growth and regeneration. Although it is midnight, "the crowing cock" is awake. Christabel ventures from the protection of her father's castle to pray for her far-off lover under "the huge oak tree" with its "rarest mistletoe," further symbols of fertility.<sup>15</sup> She has been dreaming about her knight and, although Coleridge does not choose to tell us in the text what sort of dreams they were, two lines erased before publication indicate that they have upset, confused, and perhaps erotically stimulated her.

Christabel's mood throughout Part I is a mixture of eagerness and excitement. Her prayers are apparently answered when Geraldine suddenly materializes behind the tree, uttering a moan in response to her own. Christabel is startled but attracted by her lovely appearance—a combination of opulence and captivating disorder:

The neck that made that white robe wan,  
Her stately neck, and arms were bare,



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Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were,  
And wildly glittered here and there  
The gems entangled in her hair

Geraldine further excites her with the tale of her kidnapping and probable rape by five warriors. Christabel sees her, initially, as a maiden threatened by sexual violence, perhaps imagining herself, as a prospective bride, to be in the same position. She projects her own modesty onto the sophisticated Geraldine and herself assumes her lover's role, gently wooing Geraldine as she hopes the knight will woo her. Christabel encourages and leads to her bed a sometimes reluctant lady. As soon as she learns Geraldine's story, she offers her hospitality, generously but perhaps too ardently. Like a bridegroom she carries Geraldine across the threshold and offers a "cordial" wine of "virtuous powers" to revive the fainting maiden. After undressing, Christabel is too excited to sleep, so she reclines in bed watching Geraldine disrobe. Thus, despite the sinister overtones of Geraldine's invasion of the household, Christabel seems eager to consummate their relationship. Her agitation ebbs only after she has been sexually embraced:

Her limbs relax, her countenance  
Grows sad and soft; the smooth thin lids  
Close o'er her eyes; And tears she sheds---  
Large tears that leave the lashes bright!  
And oft the while she seems to smile  
As infants at a sudden light

The blood "tingles in her feet," and she falls asleep with "a vision sweet". From one point of view, this adventure is Christabel's dream of bliss with her lover. She temporarily plays the male role to push the incident quickly to its climax, but, as she lies with Geraldine afterward, she has become a deflowered but grateful female.

As even a cursory reading of Part I will indicate, Geraldine is also a foul witch whose influence will curse and paralyze Christabel in the manner that the mother in "The Three Graves" ruined those around her. As she disrobes, she reveals her "bosom and half her side," which, in the manuscripts, "are lean and old and foul of hue". Again

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Christabel's fantasy, this time of sex as a repulsive marital duty, is depicted by Geraldine. It is Geraldine who is disgusted by her body and the act it must perform. After a long moment of indecision, she "Collects herself in scorn and pride, / And lay down by the Maiden's side". As she casts her spell, she sentences Christabel to share "This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow". By the Conclusion to Part I, Christabel imagines that she has been stained by male caresses and will grow hideous and diseased from sexual excess: "sorrow and shame! Can this be she, / The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?.

Coleridge has described a conflict not between helpless innocence and supernatural evil but between two of Christabel's attitudes toward her own sexual being. Pleasure and disgust struggle for control, but her psyche cannot resolve the battle. She awakens the next morning to find a rejuvenated Geraldine, the beautiful and "lofty lady" she has dreamed of becoming. Christabel, however, is now perplexed by a sense of having committed "sins unknown."

Christabel discovers in herself the source of her terror and aversion. Her initial adolescent distaste at the idea of male violation has, through the power of destructive fantasy, turned to a self-hatred that threatens not only her engagement but her capacity to mature into an adult able to give and receive love. Geraldine, as Christabel's other self, has shown her that she is subject to forbidden desires, even if their exact nature is unknown to her conscious mind. Tormented by seemingly inexplicable feelings of guilt for "sins unknown," Christabel begins to impersonate the serpent she has observed in Geraldine. Christabel has (or would have) reached the crisis in her development. When Geraldine appears as the lover, Christabel nears the recognition that she identifies her love for the knight with her dread of his sexual and emotional demands. She must face these anxieties if the real knight is ever to replace the false one. At the moment of realization, Geraldine disappears, presumably merging with the adolescent Christabel to form a loving and virtuous wife.