Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Christabel"

Overview of "Christabel"

Plot Summary

"Christabel" is an unfinished poem by Samuel Coleridge. The protagonist, Christabel, wakes from a strange dream at the stroke of midnight. Unable to sleep, she journeys into the gardens outside of her father's castle. Christabel comes across a disheveled and upset stranger named Geraldine. Pitying the distraught stranger, Christabel invites Geraldine into her father's manor. Christabel and Geraldine spend the night together. Christabel's father, Sir Leoline, becomes infatuated with Geraldine while Bracy, Leoline's bard, has an ominous dream that casts doubt on Geraldine's identity. Unfortunately, before any confirmation on Geraldine's identity can be confirmed or denied, the poem abruptly ends.

The Importance of the Poem's Structure

"Christabel" is divided into four parts--two narrative parts with a conclusion to each part. The four parts differ in structure, tone and purpose, raising many questions as to Coleridge's intentions as he developed the poem. Part I's mysterious tone tells of Christabel's discovery of Geraldine and their developing relationship. The Conclusion to Part the First summarizes the events of Part I, yet offers no actual "Conclusion." Part II introduces two new characters and the occurrence of events is now interwoven with Christabel's supernatural visions of Geraldine’s changing form. The Conclusion to Part the Second is the most disconnected section of the poem, offering a whimsical, general illustration of a young child and the struggles that can face the relationship between father and child.

The lack of cohesion in the four parts of the poem, along with inconsistent overall structure in meter, rhyme and verse raise many important questions for discussion:

-Is the poem meant to be unfinished? Are certain questions meant to remain unanswered (who is Geraldine, etc)?

-What is the significance of the seemingly unrelated Conclusion to Part II? Does it offer any conclusion?

-How does the inconsistent structure effect, or add to, the overall understanding of the poem?
Table of Contents

Plot Summary
The Importance of the Poem's Structure
Good vs Evil
Gender Roles
Dreams
Christianity
The Poem as it Relates to the Author's Life
Biography
Main Characters
Geraldine: The Sequel to Coleridge's Christabel
Geraldine as a Vampire

Important Dates

-Kubla Khan- 1797
-Christabel- 1797-1800
-The Rime of the Ancient Mariner- 1797-1798

Form is Content

Good vs Evil
The concept of Good vs Evil has a strong presence throughout Christabel. The two central characters appear to represent both of these qualities; Christabel the “good” and Geraldine the “evil”. Christabel, the “lovely lady” (23), is described as “gentle,” bringing Geraldine into her home with “love and in charity” (231, 265). Geraldine on the other hand is described as a “prison” to Christabel in Part One of the poem when she casts a controlling spell upon the damsel, and becomes physically evil in description in Part Two when she appears to Christabel to be “old” and “cold” (444-5). Though the other characters do not experience this, Christabel also sees Geraldine with serpent-like qualities, “hissing” as she speaks “of malice” (446, 574). The forces of good and evil seem to be in conflict during the poem - as the effect of Geraldine’s evil qualities appear to test Christabel’s good ones. Christabel is ashamed that she feels drawn to watch Geraldine undress, Geraldine’s spell significantly affects Christabel’s ability to communicate with her father, and Geraldine’s relationship with Sir Leoline cause Christabel to feel anger and jealousy.

While the contrast between Christabel and Geraldine often appears to represent a simple contrast of good and evil respectively, there are also instances in which the distinction between the two becomes less clear. Christabel for instance begins “hissing” when she speaks later on in the poem, and she begins to “imitate/that look of dull and treacherous hate” that she sees in Geraldine (593). Similarly, Geraldine is depicted as beautiful, dressed in white, and having a pleasant voice. She is seen as a “sweet maid” by Sir Leoline and described as her own father’s “beauteous dove” (557). Although Christabel seems to be the “good” character and Geraldine the “evil” character, these subtle descriptors throughout the poem put into question the strength of these attributes. By infusing each character with characteristics that defy what they “should” represent, Coleridge creates an interesting contrast, if not union, between good and evil.

**Discussion Questions:**
- Are we meant to view Christabel as “good” and Geraldine as “evil”?
- What might Coleridge be trying to say about good and evil by giving the two characters contradicting qualities (ex. ‘evil’ Geraldine dressed in white)? Are good and evil in the poem inseparable?
- What are the possible explanations for Geraldine’s character? Is she an evil spirit? An innocent woman struggling with evil inside of her?
- Does Christabel’s innocence or “goodness” change over the course of the poem?

**Gender Roles**
The dynamic between Christabel and Geraldine demonstrates an important motif in the poem. Geraldine seems to be corrupting Christabel, who is innocent and naïve before she rescues Geraldine. The presence of Geraldine in her bedroom seems to leave Christabel with a dilemma she is not familiar with. Her sexuality has never been an option, nor has it ever been called into question. Christabel is very unsure about her feelings for Geraldine: “But thro’ her brain of weal and woe/So many thoughts mov’d to and for/That vain it were her lids to close;/So balf way from the bed she rose, /And on her elbow did recline/TO look at the lady Geraldine.” Losing her mother helped shape Christabel’s role as a woman. Geraldine can be seen as a mirror image of Christabel, but a fallen one. The actions of Geraldine indicate the opposite end of the spectrum for what Christabel could have turned out like without a maternal influence. Her father, Sir Leonline, influences the role Christabel plays. He pushes his daughter away and directs his attention to Geraldine. By pursuing a sexual relationship with a younger woman, Sir Leonline seems to be fearful of losing his youth. He could be trying to recreate the life he had with his late wife.

Discussion Questions
- What is the role of the maternal figure in this poem?
- Can the relationship between Christabel and Geraldine be compared to a mother/child relationship?
- Do you read the relationship between Christabel and Geraldine as a sexual one, or is it strictly platonic?

Dreams

“Christabel” features multiple meaningful dreams. In fact, the reason Christabel is in the woods at such an unholy hour is because “She had dreams all yesternight/Of her own betrothed knight;/And she in the midnight wood will pray.” (Lines 27-29). Having a dream act as the catalyst for the entire poem certainly lends significance to the rest of the dreams in the poem. The protagonist, Geraldine, is even described as “A sight to dream of, not to tell!” (Line 247). Furthering the importance of dreams in the poem is the unfinished, hazy nature of the work. One could interpret, due to the poem’s gothic atmosphere and the seemingly supernatural-ness of Geraldine, the entire poem as a dream.
One of the most important dreams in the poem, oddly enough, belongs to none of the main characters. Instead the dreamer is Bracy the Bard. A bard is a professional poet who is employed by a nobleman, in this case Christabel's father. In Bracy's dream he envisions a dove, "call'st by thy own daughter's name Sir Leoline?" being strangled by a green snake in the very woods where Christabel found Geraldine (Lines 522-523). Furthering the connection between Bracy's dream and reality, the dream occurred exactly when Christabel and Geraldine met. Christabel's father, Sir Leoline, interprets the vision as Geraldine being the white dove and her kidnappers being the snake; however, it is important to note that Geraldine has charmed Sir Leoline so much that he is seemingly under a spell. He is infatuated with her and his interpretation of the dream seems to be exactly what she would want. The informed reader would be wise to listen to the dreamer, Bracy, who knows the dove is a representation of Christabel. Regardless of how you interpret the dream, the Christian connotations of it are undeniable. Placing a green snake in a garden is very reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve. Christabel's name, a pretty basic combination of the Christian figures Christ and Abel, makes these connections harder to dismiss as coincidence. This dream is undeniably important because it is the first concrete example of Geraldine's unfriendly nature. While small clues occur throughout the poem, such as the barking dog, Bracy's dream really makes us question Geraldine's motives.

Discussion Questions:
-Could the entire poem just be a dream? If so, what evidence can you use to back that theory?
-How do you interpret Bracy's dream? Do you agree with Sir Leoline, that Geraldine is the innocent dove?
-What other religious overtones do you see in Bracy's dream, if any?
-Does it strike you as odd that the dream comes from such a marginal character?
-Do you think that Bracy's poetic background helps give his dream more weight?

Christianity

Along with the presence of good and evil in Christabel is the relation of these concepts to origin of good an evil as presented in Biblical literature. The two characters first meet in a garden as Christabel prays, much like the Garden of Eden as described in the Bible. Geraldine, the "bright green snake"(537) appears to represent temptation as the snake tempts Adam and Eve in the origin of sin. Sin, and fear of sin, plays a large role in the transformation of Christabel as a character. After watching Geraldine undress, Christabel remarks "Sure I have sinn'd" (369). She feels guilt for having given into temptation and lust, and prays "That He, who on the cross did groan/ Might wash away her sins"(377). The narrator also calls, "Jesu, Maria, shield her well" (56) throughout the poem, as if calling upon Jesus and Mary to protect Christabel from the powers of Geraldine. In addition to simply the concept of good and evil, it is suggested that Geraldine's influence is that of the devil who has come to test Christabel's innocence and perhaps faith.

-How important is the presence of these religious nuances to the interpretation of the poem?
-What, if any, statement may Coleridge have been trying to make about religion in Christabel?
-Is the character of Geraldine representative of the Devil?
No secret has been made of Samuel Coleridge’s eccentric personality, largely fueled by opiates, and his egocentric nature. While interviews with family members and friends reinforce second-hand reports about his uniqueness abound, it can be argued that one only need look at his unfinished poem, *Christabel*, to decode his autobiography. Throughout his life, both personally and professionally, Coleridge presented himself as a victim. He had trouble maintaining relationships, difficulties producing his writing and felt misunderstood, underappreciated and used. Coleridge made the decision to veil his identity by using a feminine name for the main character in the poem, but brilliantly opted for a name loaded with interpretive potential. Taken in two parts, Christ and Abel, the name relates Coleridge’s perception of himself as a sacrificial victim. His long-time literary partner and rumored lover, William Wordsworth, is represented by the antagonistic yet sensual character of Geraldine. Clearly, Coleridge’s actual relationship with Wordsworth was tempestuous on many levels. He considered himself ill-used by his partner; however, found it impossible to extract him from his existence. More frustration mounted because Coleridge felt that his pleas to be understood by Wordsworth and others went unnoticed. Wordsworth vehemently opposed the publication of *Christabel* perhaps fearing exposure due to its interpretive autobiographical nature. Coleridge prevailed even though the poem was unfinished. Coleridge was ambiguous about why he failed to complete the poem. Perhaps, it can be said that he was unable to envision an ending because he life wasn’t over.

Additional Information on Coleridge

Biography

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born October 21st, 1772 in a small town outside of London. He attended boarding school as a child, but disliked the strict instruction. Just as Coleridge was completing secondary school in 1789, the French Revolution began. He started to engage in radical politics, causing problems at Cambridge and in his relationships with his family. Unhappy with the lack of support, he went missing and joined the army under a fake alias.

In 1795, Coleridge married Sara Fricker and the two had four children. During this time, with the help of his friend William Wordsworth, Coleridge enjoyed one of his most creative periods, producing works like “Conversation Poems,” “Frost at Midnight,” and “The Nightingale.” His work focused on topics involving the fusion of God, man, and nature. In 1797, Coleridge and Wordsworth collaborated on one of Coleridge’s most famous poems “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” “Kubla Khan” was also written during this period and came about from Coleridge’s ‘psychological curiosity’ of the dreams coming from opium use.

Coleridge then developed a habitual problem with opium, a problem he reflected in “The Pains of Sleep.” In 1789, Coleridge and Wordsworth published a collection of their poems anonymously in “Lyrical Ballads.” Perhaps due to his addiction his work began to focus on topics of alienation, depression and struggles within relationships. Now alienated from his family, Coleridge began living with friend James Gillman in 1817. Here Coleridge finished his largest prose work “Biographia Literaria” before his death due to heart failure in 1834.


The Poem

- The Poem (text)
- The Poem with an excellent introduction and notes
- Christabel Read Aloud

Characters

Main Characters

Christabel: Christabel is the protagonist of the poem, as the events center around the night she finds Geraldine in her garden. The lovely lady is unable to sleep, being awoken by a dream of her lover, a knight who is “far away” (32). So, she leaves her father’s castle and ventures into their garden where she comes across a young woman named Geraldine. Being the pious woman that she is, Christabel offers to help Geraldine. Christabel becomes increasingly wary of Geraldine, especially after they sleep with one another. Christabel’s character is fairly consistant throughout the poem, showing no major changes by the poem’s end.

“But thro; her brain of weal and woe/So many thoughts mov’d to and fro/That vain it were her lids to close” (Lines 233-235)
Geraldine: Geraldine is the antagonist of the poem, and her presence in "Christabel" contributes to many of the poem's major themes. The relationship between Christabel and Geraldine signifies the contrast between the divine and the wicked. We meet Geraldine as Christabel finds her in the woods, after being kidnapped by five men. At first, Geraldine seems to be an innocent damsel in distress. As Christabel reveals she lost her mother, Geraldine shows a more disturbing side, having an aggressive argument with the spirit of Christabel's mother. Geraldine paints herself as the evil image of Christabel. She taunts Christabel with the fact that she will know how evil Geraldine is, but will not be able to tell anyone about it. Geraldine also brings an element of shifting gender roles to the poem. She appears hyper sexualized as she undresses in front of Christabel. She also attempts to engage Sir Leoline, Christabel's father, in a sexual relationship. Geraldine creates the action within the narrative structure of the poem and provides a dynamic of good versus evil between Christabel and herself.

"There she sees a damsel bright/drest in a silken robe of white/ her neck, her feet, her arms were bare/ and the jewels disorder'd in her hair" (Lines 60-63)

Supporting Cast

Sir Leoline: Sir Leoline is Christabel's father. He is a rich baron who is wealthy enough to afford his own castle and a private poet. It is mentioned in the poem that he is old and also weak in health. He seems to be a fairly broken man due to the death of his wife during childbirth. This grief is reflected in his relationship with Christabel in the poem, as it is suggested that Sir Leoline may feel some resentment towards Christabel for being the cause of her mother's death. Sir Leoline becomes infatuated with Geraldine in the poem in both a fatherly and romantic way. He appears to begin favoring the new woman over his own daughter, perhaps as a way of filling some of the emptiness he has felt living without a wife.

"O, then the Baron forgot his age/ His noble heart swell'd high with rage... That they, who thus had wrong'd the dame/ were base as spotted infamy!" (Lines 419-420 & 424-425)

Bracy the Bard: Under the impression that Geraldine is the daughter of his estranged friend, Sir Leoline sends his poet-in-residence, Bracy (The Bard), to Sir Ronald de Vaux to extend a welcoming message. Bracy has a dream which involves a dove (Christabel) being trapped by a snake (Geraldine). Bracy conveys this message to Sir Leoline, but to no avail.

"And Bracy replied, with faltering voice... This day my journey should not be/ So strange a dream hath come to me. " (Lines 509 & 514-515)

The Knight: The Knight is the only name we get for Christabel's lover. However, his importance is undeniable. A nightmare involving the knight is what propels Christabel to go to the garden at midnight. From the few lines about her dream, it seems as if her knight is in battle far away. Christabel seems worried about his safety and it is likely that the two haven't been together for quite some time.

"She had dreams all yesternight/ Of her own bethrothed knight/ Dreams, that made her moan and leap" (Lines 27-29)
Lord Roland de Vaux of Tyermaine: Lord Roland is supposedly Geraldine’s father. However, the poem ends before Bracy has a chance to confirm this fact and it can be inferred that Lord Roland may not be Geraldine’s father.

"Alas! They had been friends in youth; but whispering tongues can poison truth...with lord Roland and Sire Leoline/Each spake words of high disdain...They parted-ne’er to meet again!" (Lines 396-397, 403-404, & 406)
Modern Day Adaptions

Christabel was adapted into a budget film. Directed by James Fotopoulos, this film was so small that information on the movie is hard to find (and it is impossible to find clips of it). However, more information can be found at Fotopoulos’ website.

Geraldine: The Sequel to Coleridge’s Christabel

By: Martin Farquhar Tupper (click title for link)

Tupper’s reasoning for writing the continuation was a quote Coleridge made in his preface to the 1816 edition of Christabel: “I trust that I shall be able to embody in verse the three parts yet to come, in the course of the present year” (Tupper, ix).

Summary of Part 1

The poem begins with images of magic and witchcraft, making the assertion that Geraldine has to concoct spells to transform herself from her true self of a ugly, old witch, into the beautiful woman described in Christabel. She then morphs into a green-eyed serpent and slinks back into the old oak tree where Christabel first encountered her, and reappears on the ground in her human form.

A dwarf, Ryxa the Hag, appears. Geraldine asserts that Christabel can’t be harmed by their evil spell because someone loves her. Ryxa tells her that since she failed, she is under his power for another 500 years, and if Geraldine can’t break up their love, she will stay in serpent form for 1,000 years.

Part 2

Amador and Christabel are childhood friends. Sir Leoline gets upset that Amador isn’t trying to win over his daughter so he banished Amador. They meet one last time before he leaves and realize they love each other.

Amador goes to the Holy Lands and becomes a knight through his success in battles. Christabel hears of all his tales and how he’s still in love with her. Amador returns for Christabel, but just as he sees Christabel, Geraldine appears and he give Geraldine more attention.

Part 3

Christabel is heartbroken. Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine comes to Leoline’s castle to challenge his to battle. They end up discovering they are long-lost brothers and Geraldine is Roland’s daughter.

Amador shows up for the battle and sees how upset Christabel is and he realizes he truly loves her. Geraldine is turned into a serpent for 1,000 years and Amador and Christabel get married.
One possible interpretation of Geraldine is that she is a vampire. As Timothy Sexton points out, in his excellent article "Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Christabel: Vampires and Transsexualism," she has numerous vampiric traits. We highly recommend reading his article, where he points to full moons, barking dogs, and over-sexuality as his evidence. Some other evidence we found includes:

- Geraldine's paleness - "Nay, fairer yet! And yet more fair!" (line 362)
- She can't enter Christabel's house unless she is invited in - "And Christabel with might and main /Lifted her up, a weary weight,/Over the threshold of the gate:/Then the lady rose again," (line 125)
- Entire poem occurs during the night
- Hypnotic eyes - "A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy,/And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head,/Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye," (line 571)
- Geraldine is an object of sexual desire to both Sir Leoline and Christabel

For more information on vampires, check out this extremely informative wiki on John Polidori's "The Vampyre"!


Image Gallery

12. Female Vampire
11. Christianity
10. 19th C. Painting of a Dreamer

6. Coleridge Circa 1795
5. Kubla Khan
4. Ancient Mariner Statue