

*S. T. Coleridge's "Christabel"  
Is Complete and Ends with  
Christabel's Defeat*

*Dr. Mustasem Tawfeek Al-khadr\**

---

\*tulkarem Educational Region, ALQuds Open University, Palestine.

## ملخص

اعترف س. ت. كوليريج بأنه حاول مراراً وتكراراً أن ينهي قصيدته «كريستابل» الشهيرة، ولكن جميع محاولاته باءت بالفشل. هذه الورقة البحثية هي محاولة لإثبات أن س. ت. كوليريج لم يستطع إنهاء «كريستابل» لأن القصيدة في المقام الأول هي قصيدة كاملة وحكاية رمزية تشير إلى هزيمة الشاعر داخل كوليريج. وأما الأمر الثاني وهو أن كوليريج خطط لإنهاء هذه القصيدة، والتي تبدو له بأنها غير كاملة، بنهاية سعيدة بانتصار كريستابل، وهذا ما يتناقض مع ما تمثله وترمز إليه الشخصيات في هذه القصيدة. إن دراسة وتحليل الصور الشعرية الموجودة في القصيدة وما تمثله وترمز إليه، كالحلم الذي رآه براسي وما يحتويه من صورة شعرية أساسية لفهم القصيدة، ألا وهي صورة الحمامة التي تلتف حولها الأفعى فتحبسها وتمنعها من الطيران، تبين بوضوح أن هذه القصيدة كاملة، وتنتهي بطريقة منطقية وهي هزيمة وانعزال وكآبة كريستابل، بالرغم من أن صاحب القصيدة يعتقد جازماً بأنها قصيدة لم تكتمل بعد.

## *Abstract*

*S. T. Coleridge admitted that he tried repeatedly to finish "Christabel" but his attempts were in vain. This paper is an attempt to prove that Coleridge could not finish "Christabel" because, first, it is a complete poem and a symbolic tale that alludes to the defeat of the poet in him, and second, Coleridge apparently planned to end the seemingly unfinished "Christabel," happily by making Christabel victorious, which contradicts with what the characters in the poem represent. However, studying the images used in "Christabel," their connotations and what they represent and allude to -- such as Bracy's dream with its main image of a dove imprisoned by a snake coiled around it -- show that the poem is not, as it seems to be, unfinished. To the contrary, despite Coleridge's firm belief that "Christabel" is a fragment, it is complete and ends logically with Christabel's isolation, desolation and defeat.*

## ***Introduction:***

It is puzzling to think about the reasons behind Coleridge's inability to complete «Christabel,» although he had been trying unsuccessfully to do so for more than 30 years. When Coleridge started his attempts to complete it and could not, he resorted, as it was his habit, to finding excuses for his failure. Thus, he speculated (Griggs 1956: Vol. 1. 407) that a quarrel with his friends might have been the cause. Then, after some time, he referred to another reason that prevented him from finishing «Christabel,» (Griggs 1956: Vol. 1. 643):

I tried to perform my promise [to finish "Christabel"] but the deep unutterable Disgust, which I had suffered in the translation of that accursed Wallenstein, seemed to have stricken me with barrenness—for I tried and tried, and nothing would come of it.

After that Coleridge became increasingly disturbed because he could add nothing, and so he repented the publishing of "Christabel" (Nethercot 1962: 23): "Meantime, the Christabel, which I should never have consented to publish, a mere fragment as it was." Then, at one point he felt so desperate to complete "Christabel" that he had to say (Griggs 1956: Vol. 1. 623): "I abandon Poetry all together." In fact Coleridge was somewhat puzzled by his unexpected failure to bring "Christabel" to a closure, which is evident from the following admission (Project Gutenberg 2005: 223):

The reason of my not finishing Christabel is not, that I don't know how to do it—for I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from the beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the idea, an extremely subtle and different one.

This admission is unusual for Coleridge because it abandons his habit of finding excuses for his failure to carry on with his unfinished poem. Thus, "Christabel" clearly, was a different case for him.

Not only did Coleridge speculate on the reasons why he could not finish "Christabel," several critics also did. But none of them tried to prove his claim. Some, for example Watson (1970: 105), even denied the necessity of having a reason or reasons for Coleridge's failure to finish "Christabel" because it may have happened "from no reason at all."

On the other hand, many believe in the existence of one reason or another for the poet's failure. May (1997) suggests that a number of "instabilities," "the disruptions in the text" and the lack of the "mastery of the construct" are behind Coleridge's failure. Walsh (1973: 110) believes that the "lack of organisation" and "the arbitrariness" are behind Coleridge's failure to finish. Hough (1963: 65) says that Coleridge did not conceive "Christabel" "as a whole," and so there is a defect in the structure that puzzled even Coleridge.

In Beer's opinion (1977: 237), Coleridge failed because "Christabel" is a mixture of "both angelic and evil natures" and other diverse elements. Charpentier (1929: 143) refers to Coleridge's inability to "return to the same state of spiritual grace in which it had first come to him" as the cause behind his failure. Harding (1974: 73) thinks that Coleridge was unable to finish his poem "because of the difficulty of keeping Christabel innocent, while enabling her to overcome the power exerted by Geraldine." In Yarlott's opinion (1967: 191), Coleridge "discovered unexpected analogies between the story in the poem and his real-life situation, causing him to load it with a weight of personal significance from which he was unable afterwards to rescue it."

To solve this Coleridgean failure to finish "Christabel," I start with the following assumption, which this paper tries to prove in order to substantiate the claim that "Christabel" is a complete poem: Christabel represents the poet's creativity, and Geraldine represents what blocks up his imagination. Although there is nothing explicit in the poem to support this line of interpretation, a study of the images used convinces us that this is the way to do justice to the poem's main theme.

### *Arguments in support of the claim that Christabel represents the poet's creative imagination*

I shall now enumerate the reasons for my claim that Christabel represents the poet's creative imagination, and Geraldine represents what blocks it:

First, Bracy's dream is a cornerstone to the understanding of the poem. Its core image portrays Christabel as a dove, while Geraldine is represented as a serpent that coils around that dove:

*I stooped, methought, the dove to take,  
I stooped, methought, the dove to take,  
I stooped, methought, the dove to take,  
When lo! I saw a bright green snake  
When lo! I saw a bright green snake  
When lo! I saw a bright green snake  
Coiled around its wings and neck.  
Green as the herbs on which it couched,  
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;  
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,*

Swelling its neck as she swelled hers: (Coleridge, Ernest 232: 548–54) [All subsequent references to Coleridge's poetry are taken from Coleridge: Poetical Works, Ed. E. H. Coleridge. (1967). London: Oxford University Press. They are cited parenthetically within the text by me – tioning the page number followed by the line number]

This image is an epitome of the whole theme of the poem. The dove, as a bird, is related archetypally with imagination, spontaneity and the freedom of creativity. This image, in this sense, is used by Coleridge in a number of his poems. For example, in *The Ancient Mariner*, when the Mariner becomes free from his state of his enslavement -- Life-in-Death -- and appreciates the beauty of the water-snakes, many singing birds appear in the sky, and their appearance signals his freedom (200: 359–62):

*I heard the sky-lark sing;  
Sometimes all little birds that are,  
How they seemed to fill the sea and air  
With their sweet jargoning!*

Thus, this image in "Christabel" portrays Christabel, the dove, entangled and imprisoned by the serpent, Geraldine, who represents what suffocates freedom and imagination. On the other hand, serpents, which often hide themselves in dark places, in the Christian traditions symbolize the forces of death and darkness because the devil took the form of a snake when he tempted Eve and Adam to eat from the forbidden tree. (Frye 1990: 157) "The serpent, because of its role in the Garden of Eden story, usually belongs on the sinister side of our catalogue in Western literature." Therefore, the image of the serpent (Schulz 1964:37) cannot but be that of "self-destruction." It is also worthwhile to note that because the image of the dove and the snake is seen in a dream, it indicates that the forces that threaten Christabel are mysterious and not easy to detect.

Second, it is clear from the poem that Christabel feels more comfortable in contact with nature where she can freely pray for her "betrothed knight" in a natural environment congenial to romantic, creative imagination where there is the wood, the moonlight, and the quietness of night. Coleridge believed that the communion between nature and the poet is an essential step to poetic creativity. This is clear in "Dejection: An Ode" when he states (366: 68) that poetic "Joy" arises from a feeling of "wedding" with "Nature." Thus, Christabel, similar to the romantic poets, prays for her betrothed knight within the sanctuary of nature to be elevated spiritually as a result of her communion with nature.

Third, Christabel first meets Geraldine in Part I at night under the dim light of the moon, while Geraldine's reality is exposed through the various events in Part II under the light of the sun. In Coleridge's poetry the moon is associated with imagination while the sun is associated with everyday blunt reality and familiarity. For example, in *The Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner is exposed to hardship under the light of the sun, while

his spiritual revival, purification and appreciation of the water snakes happens under the auspices of the moon. However, Christabel's case is different from the Mariner's because she moves from being under the light of moon in her nocturnal journey to having painful relations with Geraldine under the light of the sun. Thus, Christabel is associated at the beginning with imagination and creativity as she is surrounded by the romantic scenes in the wood under the moon. Then she has undesirable links with Geraldine under the light of the sun.

Fourth, Christabel's purity and childlike simplicity are stressed in the poem. Christabel is depicted as having the innocence and purity of a child (226: 317-18): "she seems to smile / As infants at a sudden light!" Coleridge places much emphasis on childlike characteristics and considers these as a sort of prerequisite to enter into the world of poetic creativity when he says (Harper 1970: 144): "he who would enter the Kingdom of Poetry must become as a little child." Thus, Christabel enters this kingdom and represents the pure world of imagination. Moreover, Coleridge emphasized this concept by depicting a child and his relations with his surroundings in the conclusion to "Christabel" depicting the child's need, as Christabel, of (236: 272, 676) "love and pity" and not feelings of "rage and pain."

Fifth, The interior decoration of Christabel's room exhibits her artistic sense, and by extension, her creative imagination: (222: 182-84) "The lamp with twofold silver chain / Is fastened to an angel's feet / The Silver lamp burns dead and dim." However, this description of the chain fastened to an angel's feet mirrors Geraldine's spell and grip over Christabel's imagination and angelic aspiration.

Sixth, Christabel is described as (226: 320) "a youthful hermitess" who is traditionally believed to possess certain creative powers like those of a poet because both depend on intuitions and epiphanic visions. However, though Christabel has one essential quality of a poet, creative intuition, she cannot transcend this threshold because of impediments represented by Geraldine.

Seventh, Christabel is depicted as a noble soul related to the sky (223: 227-29):

*'All they who live in the upper sky,  
Do love you, holy Christabel!  
And you love them, and for their sake.*

Because Christabel is holy, there is a bond of love between herself and the sky, which is associated in Coleridge's poetry with creativity. However, Christabel cannot transform this love into joy like the person at the end of "Kubla Khan" who (298: 52–53) "on honeydew hath fed / And drunk the milk of Paradise." The sky remains a haven to Christabel in all circumstances. Therefore, Christabel (223: 215) "raised to heaven her eyes" asking for help because (226: 330–331) "saints will aid if men will call: / For the blue sky bends over all!" This shows that the path to the sky leads to spirituality and purity and is always open. Even in case of complete lifelessness, the sky is seen as the place to which life clings and from where it starts. This is represented in the image of (365: 49–52)

*The one red leaf, the last of its clan,  
That dances as often as dance it can,  
Hanging so light, and hanging so high,  
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.*

Thus, this association between the sky and Christabel points to her deep spirituality, which is associated with creativity.

Eighth. The words "vision" and "trance" are repeated in the poem, and these words are related to poetic imagination. There is a contrast between Geraldine's touch and Christabel's visions (230: 463–65):

*The touch, the sight, had passed away,  
And in its stead that vision blest,  
Which comforted her after-rest.*

Christabel's main problem is that (226: 326) "she hath a vision sweet," but she is unable to transform that vision into intuitively creative enterprises because of Geraldine's touch, which contaminates and infects Christabel's spirituality. In this respect, she is unlike the creative person at the end of "Kubla Khan" whose experience of a trance may

provide material for great poetry or music because she simply recounts the experience in shudders. However, "that vision blest" is not enough for reviving Christabel's spirituality and getting rid of Geraldine. The word "comforted" after the words "vision blest" show that this vision is an outlet for psychological turmoil.

In addition to the above argument about what Christabel and Geraldine represent. I submit that Coleridge's attempt to execute a plan to finish "Christabel" in which Christabel will be victorious at the end is contrary to what both Christabel and Geraldine represent, and to the fact that Geraldine's spell on Christabel has completely crippled her will and spontaneity. My argument begins with the following quotation from Coleridge's early biographer, James Gillman, in which he gives an account (1838: 283) of how Coleridge, at one point in his life, envisaged how the poem should have been ended if it had to be completed:

The story of Christabel is partly founded on the notion, that the virtuous of this world save the wicked. The pious and good Christabel suffers and prays for "The weal of her lover that is far away," exposed to various temptations in a foreign land; and she thus defeats the power of evil represented in the person of Geraldine. This is one main object of the tale.

In the above quotation, Coleridge, who was a devoted Christian, is bringing in a reference to the Christian theology in which the redemption of humanity is based on Christ's sufferings and good is always victorious over evil. Because of this line of thinking of how to finish "Christabel," Coleridge could not pursue his pre-designed plan to make Christabel victorious over Geraldine, and he could not add any line of poetry to his poem. Therefore, studying "Christabel" thoroughly shows us that the logical flow of events lead to Geraldine's victory, which is the opposite of what Coleridge planned to make of Christabel. This is evident from a number of signs in the poem that foreshadow how it will be ended, that is, with Christabel's defeat.

### **Arguments in support of the claim that Christabel represents Geraldine's victory.**

First, from the very beginning of the poem the drowsy cock and the

toothless mastiff bitch face Christabel before she started her journey, and when she set out on her nocturnal adventure to the wood near the castle, the only sound heard is the hooting of the owl. Such hooting is mostly found in deserted places, and thus considered by people as a symbol of superstitiousness, destruction and (May 1997) "a harbinger of death." Besides the hooting of the owl, there is the coldness and the darkness of the night, which greet her as she steps out of the castle to the wood. These images bring immediately to the readers' minds a sense of foreboding, a feeling that the destructive forces are many and strong.

Second, during the night of her journey, Christabel is under the light of the moon, which "looks both small and dull" (216: 19) implying its waning strength, and thus reflects Christabel's spirituality.

Third, during Christabel's nocturnal journey, there was not wind enough to move even (217: 46-47) "the ringlet curl / From the lovely l – dy's cheek" or (217: 48-49) "to twirl / The one red leaf, the last of its clan" on a barren tree. To understand this image, let's refer to The Ancient Mariner. On the one hand, the start of the Mariner's plight is the cessation of the wind (190: 107-108): "Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down, / 'Twas sad as sad could be," and on the other hand, one main sign of the end of that plight and the start of the Mariner's spiritual revival from Life-in-Death is the blowing of the wind (204: 457-460):

*It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek  
Like a meadow-gale of spring  
It mingled strangely with my fears  
Yet it felt like a welcoming.*

However, in reference to the context and atmosphere of "Christ – bel," and its images of barrenness in nature, that are used, the image of the wind indicates that there is no chance for Christabel of a revival comparable to the Mariner.

Fourth, the image of the (217: 49, 52) "red leaf, the last of its clan." "On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky" is an image of barrenness in nature that reflects Christabel's spiritual void. Both Christabel and the barren twig look toward the sky for renewal, but since it is autumn,

the dryness of winter is very near. Instead of being rejuvenated and inspired as a result of her adventure. Christabel meets Geraldine. with the disastrous consequences that ensue from the meeting.

Fifth. Christabel's (216: 28) "own betrothed knight." who is first mentioned in the background of the dim light of the moon and the coldness of the surroundings. is another sign of Christabel's misery and isolation. From an atmosphere of hopelessness in "Christabel." we may say that the knight Christabel is waiting for is like the "tomorrow" in Macbeth. which will never come or like the persons in *Waiting for Godot* waiting endlessly for Godot to come. This claim becomes more acceptable if we take into consideration the forces that triumph in Part II. and the fact that the "betrothed knight" is not mentioned thereafter.

Sixth. Geraldine's ability to defeat Christabel mother's soul and bid her to flee is another sign of the defeat of Christabel's spiritual protectors. and thus accelerates her defeat (223: 211-13): "Off, woman, off! This hour is mine-- / Though thou her guardian spirit be. / Off, woman, off 'tis given to me." This shows that there can be no reconciliation between Geraldine and Christabel mother's soul because they represent two opposite forces. This is clear from Geraldine's second successful attempt to defeat the mother's soul and bid her flee. Christabel is exposed to two powerful but opposite forces: the inspirational force represented by her mother's soul and the forces of dryness represented by Geraldine. Thus. Christabel falls under the sway of a-life denying, diminishing force that drains her creative energies away. as represented by the rupture between her and her mother's soul. in addition to Christabel's giving the (222: 192) "cordial wine" to Geraldine.

Seventh. Christabel's echolalia of Geraldine's unseen presence. of her snake-like hissing sound. and her inability to free herself from Geraldine's clutches is understood symbolically when Geraldine takes Christabel in her arms (224: 263-64). It suggests that this is more an image of imprisonment. isolation and alienation than of love and friendship.

## *Conclusion:*

From the above argument, readers of "Christabel" feel Christabel's inability to defeat Geraldine. Thus, one can conclude from the poem's images that Christabel is won for good by Life-in-Death. "Christabel" ends with Christabel's ultimate defeat within the circle of the fearful isolation. She is unlike the Mariner who is freed when the Albatross is dropped from his neck. Geraldine remains as a coiling snake around Christabel's neck, and silences her after becoming lord over Christabel's every utterance. The "betrothed knight" is away and his whereabouts are unknown. Christabel's mother's soul flees because Geraldine is stronger. Leoline's heart is overwhelmed by the soft feelings he has for Geraldine and discards his daughter, which May (1997) considers as a logical end of the narrative in the poem. Bracy is already out of the castle and, like the betrothed knight, will never return. All these make the castle a symbol of spiritual void. Thus, Christabel's winter starts, and her end is sealed. Here we may apply Coleridge's description of a slave's situation to describe Christabel's complete defeat (Coburn 1951: 35): Like the slave, she seems to reach "a state out of which [she] cannot hope to rise." What strengthens this idea is Coleridge saying (Yarlott 1967: 184) that if he had to write Part III of "Christabel," it would have been "the song of her [Christabel's] desolation." "Christabel" echoes symbolically what Coleridge wrote about himself (Griggs 1956: 2, 714):

The Poet is dead in me--my imaginative (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once clothed and mitred with Flame.

One can conclude that the poem must, as it is, end with Christabel's defeat. Thus, the poem is well-rounded and tells a coherent story: It has a beginning, which is Christabel's adventure to the wood. This is followed by events leading to a climax when Geraldine casts a spell on Christabel and she comes under it. Christabel's eventual defeat and her complete spiritual isolation and barrenness effect a successful end to the plot of "Christabel."

## References:

1. *Bateson, F.W. (1966). English Poetry: A critical Study. London: Longman.*
2. *Beer, John. (1977). Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence. London: Macmillan.*
3. *Charpentier, John. (1929). Coleridge: The Sublime Somnambulist. Trans. M.U. Mugent. London: Constable.*
4. *Coburn, Kathleen, ed. (1951). Inquiring Spirit: A New Presentation of Coleridge from His Published and Unpublished Prose Writings. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.*
5. *Coleridge, Ernest Hartley, ed. (1912). Coleridge: Poetical Work. Reprinted in London: Oxford UP, 1967.*
6. *Coleridge, S. T. (1936). Lectures on Shakespeare, Etc. Comp. J.M. Dent and Sons. Every Man's Library 162. London: J.M. Dent and Sons. It includes three Books: Literary Remains, A Course of Lectures, and Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton.*
7. *Project Gutenberg, ed. (2005). Specimens of the Table Talk of S.T. Coleridge, 1833. Reprinted in Project Gutenberg E-Book, 2005.*  
*<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8tabc10.txt>*
8. *Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays. Princeton: Princeton UP. 1957. London: Penguin Books, 1990.*
9. *Gillman, James. (1838). The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. London. Reprinted in Project Gutenberg E-Book, 2005,*  
*<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8smtg10.txt>*
10. *Griggs, Earl Leslie, ed. (1956). Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 6 Vols. London: Oxford UP.*
11. *Harding, Anthony John. (1974). Coleridge and the Idea of Love: Aspects of Relationship in Coleridge's thought and writing. London: Cambridge UP.*
12. *Harper, George Mclean. (1970). "Gems of purest ray." 131-47. Reprinted in Coleridge: Studies by Several Hands on the Hundredth Anniversary of His Death, 1934. Eds. Blunden, and Griggs. (1970). New York:*

*Russet and Russet.*

13. Holmes, Richard. (1989). *Coleridge: Early Visions*. London: Penguin.
14. Hough, Graham. (1963). "Wordsworth and Coleridge." *The Romantic Poets*. London: Hutchinson U Library, 25-96.
15. House, Humphry. (1953). *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-52*. London: Rupert Hart Davis.
16. Knight, G. Wilson. (1968). *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision*. London: Methues.
17. May, Claire B. (1997). "'Christabel' and Abjection: Coleridge's Narrative in Process / on Trial'. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 37(4), 699+. Houston, Texas: Rice University
18. Nethercot, Arthur H. (1962). *The Road to Tryermaine: A study of the History, Background, and Purpose of Coleridge's "Christabel"*. New York: Russet and Russet.
19. Schulz, Max F. (1964). *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge: A Study of His Desire for Spontaneity and Passion for Order*. Detroit: Wayne State UP.
20. Walsh, William. (1973). *Coleridge: The Work and the Relevance*. London: Chatto and Williams.
21. Watson, George. (1970). *Coleridge the Poet*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
22. Yarlott, Geoffrey. (1967). *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid*. London: Methuen.