

Coleridge's Treatment of Medievalism in "Christabel" (Part I)

Medievalism is an interest in and reproduction of the mediaeval life of romance, chivalry, knight-errantry etc. It is one of the main threads in the complex web of romanticism. It plays such an important part in the Romantic Revival that Heine considered it as merely a reproduction of the life of the Middle Ages while Prof. Beers defined it as "medievalism in art". Yet Sir Walter Pater sees medievalism as only an accidental aspect of romanticism. The essential elements of the romantic spirit are curiosity and love of beauty; and it is only as an illustration of these qualities that it seeks the Middle Ages, because in the overcharged atmosphere of the Middle Ages, there are unworked sources of romantic effect, of a strange beauty, to be won, by strong imagination out of things unlikely or remote." The Middle Ages were a storehouse of romantic associations for the escape of the poetic mind from the dull pressure of the present. Coleridge, Scott and Keats – each drew his inspiration from thought-elements that fed on the past. But while Scott was attracted by its pageantry, Keats by its life of sensuous delights, Coleridge's finer imagination caught its atmosphere of mystery.

Coleridge's medievalism is intimately connected with his treatment of the mysterious and supernatural. His poetry takes us into the heart of the Middle Ages and reproduces it in all its details. This world is a veritable land of wonder, marvel, perfume and colour- of magic, superstition, witchcraft, romance, chivalry, hospitality and ruffianism.

Both the setting and characters in "Christabel" are mediaeval. Here we have an ancient castle surrounded by a moat, a dense forest at night, an oppressive silence, a calm in which the wind forgets to blow a vague moonlight- all the romantic machinery with which a sense of strangeness is awakened. The massive gate is "both ironed within and without." The baronial castle is half-light and half-darkness intensifies the atmosphere of mystery, awe and wonder.

The motherless daughter of Sir Leoline, Christabel is betrothed to a Knight for whose welfare she goes to the forest to pray. The character of Geraldine is invested with supernaturalism. She is an evil spirit with snake-like qualities, capable of assuming the shape of a beautiful woman. Supernatural omens are found when she accompanies Christabel to the castle. The mastiff bitch makes an angry moan. The dying fire leaps into a tongue of light. Geraldine casts an evil spell on Christabel. The mastiff bitch sees the shroud of Christabel's dead

mother. All these supernatural phenomenon are associated with mediaeval life. The gate was so wide that an army in battle order had marched out through it. It had a small door in the middle. The poem makes a passing reference to the different parts of the castle- its courtyard with a mastiff bitch keeping guard at night, its hall filled with a fireplace and its bed chamber with its rush covered floor, its thickly coloured windows, its figures strange and sweet and its lamp fastened to an angel's feet by means of two silver chains. These are medieval in every detail. The details are all true to history.

References to mediaeval faiths, beliefs and superstitions are found in plenty in this Roman Catholic poem. Thus Christabel was out in the forest at midnight to pray for the welfare of her betrothed Knight. In the Middle Ages people would invoke the protection of Jesus and Mary and cross themselves in the face of danger. Hearing the moan from the other side of the oak, Christabel crosses herself and prays for the protection of Jesus and Mary. In line 54 the poet says: "Jesu, Maria shield her well!" and in line 139 Christabel proposes to Geraldine "Praise we the virgin all divine." Apart from these we have a grey-haired friar, a well-known figure of the Middle Ages who heard the confessions of Christabel's dying mother who told him "That she should hear the castle bell/ Strike twelve upon my wedding day." Geraldine's thanks to her gracious stars for her good fortune in meeting Christabel during her distress are also medieval in spirit.

References to customs, costumes and practices are scattered throughout the poem. It was an article of 'stout' mediaeval chivalry to rescue ladies in distress and then send them to their parents under the care of armed guards. Christabel assures Geraldine that her father will arrange her 'safe and free' escort to her father's hall. In the Middle Ages, it was the custom to hang swords, shields and trophies on the walls of the halls. The boss of Sir Leoline's shield "hung in a murky old niche in the wall".

The dark side of the Age – its witchcraft and ruffianism is not ignored either. The witches could cast a diabolical spell on their victims who would waste and wither away. Geraldine uses her evil power to keep the spirit of Christabel's mother off to do harm to Christabel. The violence done by five ruffian Knights on Geraldine gives a faithful picture of the dark side of the Middle Ages.

The theme of the poem- the eternal conflict between god and evil has a religious character connecting it with medievalism .

Archaic words and phrases like 'naught', 'sire', 'belike', 'espy', 'withered', 'quoth', 'ever and aye', 'ah woe is me', 'woe betide' contribute no less to the medieval flavour of the poem.

The recreation of the romantic past in "Christabel" is successful by the suggestive treatment which transfers the imagination to a visionary vagueness in which everything is bathed in half light. The magic and glamour of the Middle Ages recreated in "Christabel" (Part I) have an undying appeal.