

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

'Christabel' (Part I) , according to C.B. Young, "conveys an atmosphere of eerie mystery and horror in a way unique in literature." Young adds that like 'The Ancient Mariner' , it also illustrates a distinctive gift of Coleridge, the power of making the supernatural convincingly actual and real." The incidents and agents here are, in part at least , supernatural. They possess a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief , for the moment which constitutes the poetic faith.

Of the two methods of treating the supernatural in literature a) the gross or crude b) the subtle or psychologically suggestive , Coleridge discarded the first adopted by Horace Walpole and Mrs. Radcliff and followed the second. He creates the atmosphere of mystery and horror by some superb psychological touches. So we have Walter Pater's observation: It is the delicacy , the dreamy grace in the presentation of the marvellous , which makes Coleridge's work so remarkable. The too palpable intruders from a spiritual world, in almost all ghost literature in Scott and Shakespeare even, have a kind of coarseness or crudeness. Coleridge's power is in the very fineness with which as with some really ghostly finger, he brings home to our inmost senses his inventions daring as they are." The presence of the spirit of Christabel's mother and the evil nature of Geraldine are only hinted at, left vague and indefinite as 'flickering shadows' only. This art of stirring the reader's imagination by throwing him into a state of fear and suspense can be described only in terms of the superlative.

The story is a very thin one. There is nothing sensational or blood curdling , no high drama. Christabel, the daughter of Sir Leoline, goes into the wood late one night to pray for her absent lover. There she finds a lady weeping in distress, the fair Geraldine who tells her a story of how she has been dragged away from her home by five wicked men and left in the wood to die. Christabel takes pity on her and takes her home to her castle. During the night she realizes that Geraldine is really a wicked supernatural creature and that all her story is a lie. But Geraldine casts a spell over the innocent young girl so that she cannot reveal Geraldine's true nature. The spell lasts only for an hour. Christabel is restored to her normal life with the divine grace of the saints.

Everything is left indefinite. The poem opens in the midnight in a kind of twilight, the hour of charms and enchantments.

'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock ,
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock,
To-whit! – Tu-whoo!
And hark again! The crowing cock,
How drowsily it crew.

We are transported at once to a dreamland. Our souls have a taste of fear and suspense. Coleridge succeeds wonderfully in suggesting the eeriness and remote horror of the scene without having recourse to any elaborate machinery of ghosts, goblins etc. The effect is more psychological than physical. Thus the invisible presence of the spirit of Christabel's mother and the evil nature of Geraldine are conveyed by hints. The toothless mastiff in Sir Leoline's kennel gives answer to the clock by sixteen short howls. The line "Some say she sees my lady's shroud" completes the other worldly atmosphere. When Geraldine enters the castle "The mastiff old did not awake/, / Yet she an angry moan did make!" "What can ail the mastiff bitch?" is repeated to suggest a warning against some wrong likely to be done to Christabel. In loving memory of her mother Christabel wishes "that she were there." The spirit like Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth* is visible only to Geraldine who cries out: "Off wandering mother! Peak and pine! /I have power to bid thee flee. " She stares with eyes unsettled and her voice changes abruptly. This prepares us psychologically for the evil spell on Christabel in which Christabel has a nightmare.

The poem is a masterpiece of suggesting the supernatural by purely natural means. Nature herself contributes to the mystery of the atmosphere. Nature is kept real and familiar with calm midnight, the hazy moonlight, the silent wood, the one red leaf twirling lightly on the topmost twig of the bark oak, the hooting of the owl , the crowing of the cock , the howling of the mastiff- all these are perfectly natural. No less so is the exceedingly beautiful Christabel in the moonlit wood. But when put together they all intensify the haunted atmosphere with a suggestion of gloomy foreboding. The setting is uncanny . Nature wears a weird wintry desolation:

Is the night chilly and dark?

The night is chilly but not dark.

The thin grey cloud is spread on high

It covers but not hides the sky.

The moon is behind, and at the full,

And yet she looks both small and dull.

Our senses are so overpowered that they are open to any impression that may come at the moment from the world beyond our senses. Into this world of vague, dreamy, soul-benumbing languor appears a lady, as if from nowhere, making a suppressed moan. There is hardly any human heart that does not quail in that situation. .

Coleridge's recreation of the middle ages contributes to his supernatural effect. He takes us to the middle ages when witchery, magic superstition, romance and ruffianism were all most natural in man's minds. The castle with its tower clock its court and hall, its rush spread bed chamber, kennel and surrounding moat, the iron gate are painted realistically. We are all transported to a lonely midnight in and around a mediaeval castle. Geraldine and her victim are the only beings awake. There is dim moonlight in the forest, dim fire-light in the hall and in Christabel's chamber, "the silver lamp burns dead and dim." Thus we are made to move in a mysterious world.

'Christabel' like *Macbeth* again bristles with interrogations and interjections like "What can ail the mastiff bitch?", "Can she the bodiless dead espy?" "Alas! Alas!" "Ah! Woe is me!" etc. These too enhance the effect of mystery, fear, suspense and expectancy. These are Coleridge's narrative devices to hold his readers' attention to the supernatural tale without taking their faith. The metre also with its magic and marvel contributes to the effect of the supernatural. It has a haunting beauty.