

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel*

- I. Background
 - A. Written by Coleridge in 1797
 - B. One of three supernatural poems that he wrote, along with “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”
 - C. Originally intended for the *Lyrical Ballads*, but Wordsworth considered it unsuitable
 - D. Not a fragment, but is unfinished, incomplete.
 - E. A narrative poem in the Gothic tradition
 - F. Some reviewers called it “disgusting” and “obscene”
- II. According to Coleridge’s introduction, the meter is based more on accents than syllables.
 - A. Rhythmic, but not metrically regular
 - B. Anticipates Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “sprung rhythm”
- III. Much archaic language
- IV. Much emphasis on atmosphere
 - A. poem begins at midnight;
 - B. references to owls, dreams, prayers, appeals to Jesus and Mary, and a sudden appearance of a woman in white
- V. The narrator seems uncertain of what is going on and asks questions
- VI. The name “Christabel” may be derived from two figures in the Bible, “Christ” and “Abel”
- VII. Christabel discovers Geraldine at midnight beneath an oak tree
- VIII. Her story: she had been seized by warriors and carried off the day before, and left there
- IX. A long series of portents that Geraldine may not be who/what she says she is:
 - A. She must be helped to rise (line 100)
 - B. Must be helped over the threshold (124-29)
 - C. Can’t or won’t speak when Christabel praises the Virgin Mary (134-38)
 - D. Mastiff growls when she passes (148)
 - E. Ashes flame when she passes (158)
 - F. She sinks down beneath the lamp tied to an an angel’s feet (176-83)
 - G. She perceives the spirit of Christabel’s mother, and is apparently able to drive her away (198-207)
 - H. There are several references to Geraldine’s “spell” (255, 354)
 - I. Reptilian imagery (430; Christabel hissing [448, 579]; Bracy’s dream bright green snake [537]; snake/serpent eyes [572, 590])
- X. Part Two opens with the matin bells and the Baron Christabel’s father) mourning the loss of his wife, who had died bringing Christabel into the world
- XI. Christabel awakens troubled
- XII. She has no memory of what passed between the two in the night, but feels something happened, and feels guilty
- XIII. When the Baron hears Geraldine’s tale he is outraged and remembers his old friend, her father, from whom he’s long been estranged
- XIV. Sir Leoline and Geraldine embrace
- XV. Narrator shifts point of view
- XVI. Seeing them triggers for Christabel a partial memory of what happened between the two women the previous night
 - A. There are references to a “bosom old” and a “bosom cold”
 - B. Christabel draws in her breath with a sort of hissing sound, reminiscent of snakes
 - C. Christabel’s vision passes and she has a memory of almost post-coital rapture

- XVII. Sir Leoline calls his herald, Bracy, who recounts a dream he has had
- A. He has dreamt of a dove (which he associates with Christabel) in the grip of a green snake
 - B. This recalls mythology of the lamia, half woman, half serpent, but able to change shape.
 - C. Bracy warns Sir Leoline that his daughter is in great danger, based on the dream
 - D. The Baron completely misses the point and sees Geraldine as the dove in the deadly embrace of the serpent, not his own daughter
- XVIII. Geraldine is rolling her eyes and blushing
- XIX. Christabel has a momentary vision of Geraldine in her true form as a serpent and faints, again with a hissing sound that suggests she is taking on these serpentine characteristics
- XX. Sir Leoline turns away from his own daughter, in distress, and is leading forth the lady Geraldine when the poem ends
- XXI. What happened between Christabel and Geraldine in the night?
- A. It's something mysterious and darkly erotic
 - B. Except for brief flashes, Christabel can't recall (due to the spell), but she feels guilt, and prays for forgiveness
 - C. The reptilian hissing by Christabel implies that she's somehow intertwined with Geraldine
 - D. Mythology of the vampire provides a possible explanation for why Geraldine seems to look so much healthier and more beautiful in the morning, while Christabel seems haggard, weak, and pale
 - E. This also fits the eroticism that we associate with vampires
 - F. Coleridge's marginal glosses encourage the belief of Geraldine as a witch, but she seems to better fit the definition of a vampire
 - G. Yet the serpent imagery is strongly suggestive of the lamia myth
- XXII. Whatever happened between the two women, it certainly offended Coleridge's critics
- XXIII. We will never know Coleridge's intentions, as he left poem unfinished and left no remaining notes or manuscripts