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The Paranormal in Coleridge's *Christabel*

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Abstract

Thalbourne (1982) defines "paranormal" as hypothesized processes that in principle physically impossible or outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists. Terry Davidson (2010) shares the same sentiment that the paranormal "consists of all alleged occurrences or powers which, if actual, cannot be explained by our current understanding of physics." The paper asserts that Freud's idea of the uncanny is central to any description of characters, events and the setting of *Christabel* which is riddled both the familiar and the weird or spooky- the disturbance of the familiar. The poem without doubt, belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread.

Key words: paranormal, uncanny, supernatural, familiar, unfamiliar.

Introduction

Coleridge's poetry is to a large extent, haunted, set at night, dreamy, and full of guilt. Coleridge time and again explores extreme states of mind and feelings. His poems portray the good in evil and evil in good and hence forces the reader to cautiously contemplate the nature of humanity. Within every glittering personality resides a darker chasm of evil, which like a volcano may erupt and offset the perceived human good. Poems like "Kubla Khan" and *Christabel* depict the extreme states of emotion and feeling- good and evil, within one space of existence. Coleridge's *Christabel* is riddled with situations, persons and things that evoke in readers, a sense of the uncanny- dread and fear.

Theoretical Framework

The poem shall be read alongside Edmund Freud's idea of the uncanny. According to Freud (1999), the uncanny no doubt belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread… it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general. The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar. How this can be, under what conditions the familiar can become uncanny and frightening?

Mahmutovic (2007) cites Freud as having suggested that the quidditas, something essential hidden in the heart of things, and the 'source' of this horror is associated with such phenomena as phantoms, unlikely coincidences, the evil eye, and portents imminent fatality. The discourse of the uncanny challenges beliefs and assumptions about the world and about the nature of reality. Freud's idea of the uncanny is central to any description of the poetics or literary; it is more than a matter of the weird or spooky, rather it is more about the disturbance of the familiar, troubling of definitions- who is virtuous and who is vile. It belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. According to Edmund Freud (1919) the uncanny is a terrifying feeling that comes from something previously known or familiar (*heimlich)* that has been repressed and suddenly comes to light as ugly, disturbing and unfamiliar (*unheimlich*). The discourse of the uncanny challenges beliefs and assumptions about the world and about the nature of reality.

Analysis of the poem

It is the paper's argument that Coleridge's *Christabel* possesses elements of the paranormal: the mysterious, abnormal, unearthly, incomprehensible, and beyond normal explanation both at characters level and setting. From the onset, the poem opens with the hour of midnight which is liminal and indefinite since it is a boundary separating night/ darkness and day/light. This is an hour where no one can clearly distinguish between the virtuous and the sinful, divine and demonic. The poem opens immediately with an unnatural occurrence; a cock crowing in the middle of the night as opposed to its usual morning call, "Tu—whit! Tu—whoo! This the paper argues, prepares the reader to expect the unfamiliar, the supernatural, the paranormal. Feelings conveyed about the opening scene are those of "bleakness". "weariness" and "grey"- all connoting a sense of dread. Taylor (2002) observes that *Christabel* is the most troubling to the readers and it leaves them anxious and ungrounded.

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

Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,
Hath a toothless mastiff bitch;
From her kennel beneath the rock
She maketh answer to the clock,
Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;

Ever and aye, by shine and shower,
Sixteen short howls, not over loud;
Some say, she sees my lady's shroud. (1-10)

Christabel is troubled about the welfare of the "betrothed Knight" and has sneaked out to pray and in silence, without the knowledge of her father and other inhabitants of the castle. She ventures out during a chilly and dark night:

The lovely lady, Christabel,
Whom her father loves so well,
What makes her in the wood so late,
A furlong from the castle gate?
She had dreams all yesternight
Of her own betrothèd knight;
And she in the midnight wood will pray
For the weal of her lover that's far away.

She stole along, she nothing spoke,
The sighs she heaved were soft and low,
And naught was green upon the oak
But moss and rarest misletoe:
She kneels beneath the huge oak tree,
And in silence prayeth she. (23-36)

While still praying, Christabel hears some moaning and is not sure of the source of such sound that scares her:

The lady sprung up suddenly,

lovely lady, Christabel!

It moaned as near, as near can be,

But what it is she cannot tell.

On the other side it seems to be,

Of the huge, broad- breasted, old oak tree. (37- 42)

Christabel sees Geraldine under the same oak tree (a symbol of protection) and is in distress (just like Christabel). She is presented as "forlon" and "enstranged".

There she sees a damsel bright,
Drest in a silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandl'd were,
And wildly glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.
I guess, 'twas frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly! (58- 68)

The manner of Geraldine's dress belies her dark predicament. "A damsel bright/ dressed in a silken robe of white." Although the two ladies appear on the outside to be normal, the events that follow indicate that the contrary is the case. They look homely and normal, but one sniffs at the underlying or concealed paranormal; the uncanny- the strange in the familiar. I guess, 'twas frightful there to see a lady so richly glad as she beautiful exceedingly! One notes a sharp contrast between the apparent and the perceived real. The word 'exceedingly' suggests that the beauty is extreme and too good to be true. Geraldine has a "stately neck" that made that white robe "wan". Her neck surpasses the white robe in brightness. The gems entangled in her also glitter brightly in the moonlight. Everything about her is paranormal.

Geraldine narrates her predicament of how she was "forcefully seized by five warriors who abducted her from her home and left her under the oak tree. Moving as the tale seems, her overall appearance does not suggest any unruly treatment except for her "un-sandaled feet." Everything else seems to be in place. This casts a spell of doubt on the authenticity of her improbable tale:

My sire is of a noble line,
And my name is Geraldine:
Five warriors seized me yestermorn,
Me, even me, a maid forlorn:
They choked my cries with force and fright,
And tied me on a palfrey white.
The palfrey was as fleet as wind,
And they rode furiously behind.
They spurred amain, their steeds were white:
And once we crossed the shade of night.
As sure as Heaven shall rescue me,
I have no thought what men they be;
Nor do I know how long it is
(For I have lain entranced I wis)
Since one, the tallest of the five,
Took me from the palfrey's back,
A weary woman, scarce alive.

Some muttered words his comrades spoke:
He placed me underneath this oak;
He swore they would return with haste. (79-98)

Another incident that raises eyebrows is that at threshold. Geraldine faints at the gate, an act that prompts Christabel to marshal her might and lift her across the threshold. Surprisingly, the lady, after being carried over the threshold, strangely and suspiciously regains composure and "moved as if she were not in pain":

They crossed the moat, and Christabel
Took the key that fitted well;
A little door she opened straight,
All in the middle of the gate;
The gate that was ironed within and without,
Where an army in battle array had marched out.
The lady sank, belike through pain,
And Christabel with might and main
Lifted her up, a weary weight,
Over the threshold of the gate:
Then the lady rose again,
And moved, as she were not in pain. (123-134)

In the inner part of the court, a number of mysterious things happen, signaling the presence of evil, possibly concealed in Geraldine. Coleridge writes, "Outside her kernel the mastiff old lay fast asleep in moonshine coat/ The mastiff old did not awake/ Yet she an angry moan did make. Another strange thing happens when the lady passes the hall, there is a flame of fire:

But when the lady passed, there came
A tongue of light, a fit of flame;
And Christabel saw the lady's eye,
And nothing else saw she thereby,
Save the boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall,
Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall.
O softly tread, said Christabel,
My father seldom sleepeth well. (158-165)

These ominous signs not only depict the evil in the apparent good character of Geraldine, but also forebode impending sorcery/ bewitchment of both Christabel and her father the Baron, Sir Lioline. While they are still on the stairway to the Christabel's chamber, the silver lamp "burns and dim" but Christabel "trims the lamp and makes it bright" while Geraldine in wretched plight sank down upon the floor below. The Paper argues that Geraldine's behaviour harbours the paranormal. She is a creature of darkness, afraid of the light. The two head to Christabel's chambers and once again, strange things happen:

The silver lamp burns dead and dim;
But Christabel the lamp will trim.
She trimmed the lamp, and made it bright,
And left it swinging to and fro,
While Geraldine, in wretched plight,
Sank down upon the floor below. (184- 189)

Then the good Christabel counters her weariness and fainting spell by offering the wild wine, the wine of virtuous powers that her deceased mother made from wild flowers. She then wonders if Christabel's mother would pity her.

O weary lady, Geraldine,

I pray you, drink this cordial wine!

It is a wine of virtuous powers;
My mother made it of wild flowers.

And will your mother pity me,
Who am a maiden most forlorn?
Christabel answered—Woe is me!
She died the hour that I was born.
I have heard the grey-haired friar tell
How on her death-bed she did say,
That she should hear the castle-bell
Strike twelve upon my wedding-day.
O mother dear! that thou wert here!
I would, said Geraldine, she were! (190-203)

Christabel's response is to inform her that her mother died the "hour that she was born". And intimates to Geraldine that the mother on her death-bed said that she should hear the castle bell strike twelve upon Christabel's wedding. When Christabel expresses longing for her departed mother, Geraldine says that she (mother) was there. Is Geraldine seeing the ghost of Christabel's mother or is she the incarnate of the latter? Is she hallucinating? Or is it just a figment of her diseased imagination? After the wine, her eyes "glittered bright and she stood upright and she was most beautiful to see like a lady from a far country". She seems now to be demonically possessed and she says:

'Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!
I have power to bid thee flee.'
Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?
Why stares she with unsettled eye?

Can she the bodiless dead espy?

And why with hollow voice cries she,
'Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—
Though thou her guardian spirit be,
Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me. (205- 213)

Here Geraldine seems to be exorcising Christabel's mother's spirit, thus taking over the authority of the castle by displacing the mother of the house. The initially perceived 'good' maid morphs into a harridan. She turns into a possessed and demonic maid with an "unsettled eye" and begins to perceive "bodiless dead" and her voice is altered and becomes "hollow." Taylor (2002:) asserts that Geraldine's struggle with the dead mother's hovering spirit for control of the body or soul of Christabel [and her assumption] of numerous voices, speaking to spirits, summoning of powers give her vibrating magical force. The paper observes that this incident is beyond scientific description and hence uncanny.

Christabel at this point thinks (innocently) that Geraldine behaves this way as a result of her traumatic experience of abduction by the five warriors. This, one may argue, suggests that she possesses beauty but a strange one, outside the normal. She tells Christabel that "all they who live in the upper sky, do love you, holy Christabel." At this point she speaks as if she has the capacity to communicate with the dwellers of heaven. She then instructs Christabel to un-robe herself while she prayed. Christabel complies though she is assailed by conflicting thoughts and sleep eludes her:

Fair maiden, to requite you well.
But now unrobe yourself; for I
Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie.'

Quoth Christabel, So let it be!
And as the lady bade, did she.
Her gentle limbs did she undress,
And lay down in her loveliness. (232-238)

Some critics like Mayrhofer (2012) argue that the above except indicates that Geraldine is about to rape or otherwise assault Christabel and that her attack on Christabel establishes the former's evil nature and inherent power as a femme fatale. Christabel looks at Geraldine and sees something strange: a mark beneath Geraldine's belt as she unrobes herself, and she is terribly shaken by what she sees, rendering her mute. Geraldine then takes her into her arms and chants a spell over her:

Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs;
…And in her arms the maid she took,
Ah wel-a-day!

And with low voice and doleful look
These words did say:
'In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,
This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow. (255&263-270)

Through the spell, Geraldine ensures that Christabel only remembers her predicament, and nothing about her sorcery- about her mark. Christabel's response is to inform her that her mother died the "hour that she was born". And intimates to Geraldine that the mother on her death-bed said that she should hear the castle bell strike twelve upon Christabel's wedding. Thomas (2002) observes that "one does not need to stray too far from the current discourse to suggest that Geraldine is an uncanny apparition in several respects; not only is she seen as Christabel's double in the Freudian sense; as a representative of Christabel's repression, but she has been interpreted as a return of a sort, of Christabel's mother- thus double twice.

Sir Lioline is also a victim of Geraldine's evil spell. In the morning, Christabel takes Geraldine to meet her father. Part II also opens with ghostly atmosphere. There is the Matin bell which seems to remind every about the impending end (death). The air is also still; all is ghostly and uncanny. Coleridge writes:

The lovely maid and the lady tall
Are pacing both into the hall,
And pacing on through page and groom,
Enter the Baron's presence-room.

The Baron rose, and while he prest
His gentle daughter to his breast,
With cheerful wonder in his eyes
The lady Geraldine espies,
And gave such welcome to the same,
As might beseem so bright a dame! (393- 402)

When Geraldine is introduced to Leoline, he discovers that she is the daughter of Lord Ronald de Vaux, a friend he lost through some feud. Taylor (2002) argues that Sir Leoline uses Geraldine to reawaken his friendship with Sir Roland. He then swears to send men to go after the warriors who had abducted Geraldine:

O then the Baron forgot his age,
His noble heart swelled high with rage;
He swore by the wounds in Jesu's side
He would proclaim it far and wide,
With trump and solemn heraldry,
That they, who thus had wronged the dame,

Were base as spotted infamy!
'And if they dare deny the same,
My herald shall appoint a week,
And let the recreant traitors seek
My tourney court—that there and then
I may dislodge their reptile souls
From the bodies and forms of men!'
He spake: his eye in lightning rolls!
For the lady was ruthlessly seized; and he kenned
In the beautiful lady the child of his friend! (431- 446)

The reptilian imagery used to describe the souls of the men who abducted Geraldine brings in the supernatural evil nature harbored within the souls of men. It is frightening to imagine the how men could be described in such inhuman and serpentine terms. This Taylor (2002: 716) argues, speaks to the infusion of bodies and souls, which also occurred in Christabel's bedroom chambers. Leoline then with tears in his eyes, "fondly in his arms he took / Fair Geraldine, who met the embrace, prolonging it with joyous look" (251-3).

As the two embrace, Christabel has vision of fear, but cannot tell the father about it. Instead, "She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again-/ She hisses like a snake" (454). Her transformation into a serpent is uncanny, it is paranormal. The father turns around and instead of a snake, sees his daughter. According to Taylor (2002), Leoline rages at his daughter for her appearance: her strange facial twitches, her garbed speech, her unseemly hisses, her embarrassing lack of graciousness to his new young friend.

Christabel's father then instructs the bard, Bracy to form part of the crew he wants to send to Lord Ronald, but Bracy is reluctant since he had had a vision of a green snake (like its natural surrounding) coiled around a dove. The snake here is Geraldine and the dove is Christabel. Leoline makes courtly advances to Geraldine and kisses her forehead. Geraldine casts her large bright eyes, falls on her arm, folds her arms, crushes her head across her breast, her snake eyes blink dull and shy and her eyes shrunk into her head. Each shrank up to a serpent's eye, she hisses. All these incidents demonstrate the paper's argument that the poem is riddled with uncanny events, setting and personalities.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that Christabel pulls the reader into the sphere of the uncanny; the eerie hour of midnight; the strange transformation of Christabel and Geraldine from the familiar and homely to the dreadful and scarry- the uncanny. As Freud (1919) states, "uncanny" is a terrifying feeling that comes from something previously known or familiar that has been repressed and suddenly comes to light or when primitive belief we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed. The paper has clearly captured incidents in the poem that depict the uncanny, and hence has appropriately used the theory of the uncanny to explain the paranormal in Coleridge's *Christabel*.

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