

A source of great frustration for Coleridge, *Christabel* has continued to frustrate, baffle, inspire, challenge, and intrigue readers for two hundred years. Whereas completing the poem was Coleridge's bugaboo, the fragmented nature of *Christabel* further complicates for readers an already enigmatic work. Indeed, the fact that *Christabel* is unfinished may be a great red herring for Coleridge scholars. Do we accept Derwent Coleridge and James Gillman's accounts of how Coleridge planned to continue the narrative? Do we assume that in completing the work Coleridge would not have gone back and made significant, transforming revisions of the parts that we now have? And why did Coleridge find *Christabel* so difficult to finish? Was it, as he confessed, that he could not sustain the poetic level of the earlier fragment? Or is it possible that the very paradoxes in Parts I and II that have left readers nonplussed also left Coleridge unsure of how to resolve the work? Is it possible that none of the above questions can be answered comfortably? Perhaps we should consider that to engage in too much speculation can lead us to commit intentional fallacy. Perhaps we should accept that we have what we have.

And what we have is paradox. Paradox was no stranger to Romantic poets. Indeed, paradox, incongruity, and contradiction were familiar friends to Romantic poets attempting to describe the ineffable mystical experiences that engaged the poets in such 'reconciliation of opposites.'

Mystical experiences have been described, defined, and deconstructed in many disciplinary languages.^[1] In addition to expected historical and theological sources, we find that among psychologists, Freud called it the 'oceanic experience,' Abraham Maslow the 'peak experience.'^[2] Today cognitive studies are revealing some intriguing explanations about these transcendent moments and activity in the brain's temporal lobe.^[3] Almost forty years ago Thomas R. Preston explained the frightening aspect of *Christabel*'s encounter with Geraldine as being perfectly normal in light of mystical tradition, citing as support the fact that Coleridge had been reading about Teresa of Avila at the time he began work on *Christabel*.^[4] The less easily resolved ambiguities of

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Christabel's experience can be more clearly understood in light of the anthropological concept of liminality.

Drawing on the 1908 work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner discerned that 'in all ritualized movement there was at least a moment when those being moved in accordance with a cultural script were liberated from normative demands, when they were, indeed, betwixt and between successive lodgments in jural political systems. In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen.'^[5] This Turner calls the liminal state.

Victor Turner's chief interest was in ritual processes and their effects on the individual and on the social order. Using terminology from drama, Turner described our social activities in terms of playing dramatic roles, of audience response, and of formulaic patterns (i.e., dramatic conflict, crisis, and resolution). (*Dramas* 49) Turner believed that in our rituals lie, both implicitly and explicitly, the values of our society. Turner acknowledged that no two ritual performances were alike, but he maintained that it was in the similarities rather than the differences where revelations could be found. In other words, rituals deal with the general rather than the specific, the predictable rather than the anomalous characteristics. Such aberrations were best used to

help the observer to discern what the ideal patterns would be, hence the pattern that clearly reflects the social order.

Turner emphasized that society consisted of both stable and mutable elements. It is in the rituals, in fact, in which the imminent changes of society can be assimilated while still allowing a social structure to preserve a certain degree of order. Preferring the word *societas*, Turner maintained that society was a process involving both social structure and *communitas*, separately and united in various proportions. (*Dramas* 238) Social structure is 'the patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-sets, and status-sequences consciously recognized and regularly operative in a given society.' (*Dramas* 237) *Communitas* is a feeling of interrelatedness that goes beyond bonds of social obligation; it is a result of liminal experience attendant with certain rituals.

Rituals are 'a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests.' Contingent rituals are 'held in response to an individual or collective crisis' and 'may be further subdivided into life-crisis ceremonies, which are performed at birth, puberty, marriage, death, and so on, to demarcate the passage from one phase to another in the individual's life-cycle, and rituals of affliction, which are performed to placate or exorcise preternatural beings or forces believed to have afflicted villagers with illness, bad luck, gynecological troubles, severe physical injuries, and the like.'^[6] The significant distinction between these contingent rituals and cyclical or calendrical rituals is that they are generated by

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a life crisis or an individual's conflict with the structure rather than by some externally imposed factor such as a date on the calendar or the harvest.

Structure, then, is the framework of a social system. It is somewhat static, certainly stable; and it is non-egalitarian. *Communitas* is the feeling of oneness, of bonding, which goes beyond any social obligations or external bonds. It challenges structure, hence is anti-structural. *Societas* (society) is the process, a combination of the stable forces of structure and the challenges of *communitas*.

The concept of liminality can provide some insight into the enigmatic and fragmentary nature (both structural and thematic) of *Christabel*. In his works, Turner outlines the three phases of 'transition rites': separation, margin, and reaggregation. (*Dramas* 231) The term *liminality* comes from *limen*, meaning 'threshold,' and refers to the 'betwixt-and-between' state in the process of spiritual or psychological progress. Again, liminality is part of all rituals of transition and is characterized by a retreat, real or psychic, from the social structure; a medial period that is timeless and ambiguous; and a resulting transformation and return to the social structure that has now been redefined. *Communitas*, as an affect of the liminal state, is the basis of the new social order and stresses equality; therefore, it disrupts the hierarchical structure of the past. According to Turner, then, such ritual at once undermines the status quo and effects real social progress.

The three phases of liminality can be traced in the narrative fragment of *Christabel*. Certainly the encounter with Geraldine is the central event of this rite of transition initiated by Christabel. But it is important to note that the crisis does not begin with Geraldine's appearance. Preceding that appearance is the separation, or pre-liminal phase, in which Christabel leaves her father's home in order to pray for her distant betrothed, about whom disturbing dreams have made her anxious. This act reflects Christabel's isolation as she reaches a crisis point in what is clearly a patriarchal but moribund social structure, represented by both her father's illness and the eminent end of the patriarchal line. Indeed, it can be argued that the whole social structure, not just Christabel's place in it, is in crisis. There are all sorts of problems at the castle of Sir Leoline. First, this is a feudal, hence a patriarchal and hierarchical society, and

Sir Leoline has no male heir. Christabel is his only child; she is like the lone red leaf that Coleridge compares to 'the last of its clan.' (l. 49) Moreover, no one seems to sleep well in the castle. Leoline himself is not well; Christabel warns Geraldine that they must be quiet, for he is restless. The toothless mastiff (a poor excuse for a watchdog!) is disturbed by dreams that have her snarling in her sleep. Christabel has been troubled by dreams, as has Bard Bracy. Indeed, the only people who seem to sleep well are Geraldine, who 'slumbers still and mild' (l. 300) and who is even more fair the next morning for having drunk 'all the blessedness of sleep' (ll. 374-76); and the knights, who should be counted on to guard the castle, but instead sleep soundly, enabling Christabel to sneak out of the castle and return with the apparently treacherous Geraldine.

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The moribund atmosphere of Leoline's house is also present in the master's insistence upon the daily memento mori of the bells. Leoline obsessively mourns the death of his wife, and as she died giving birth to Christabel, his daughter must be a constant reminder of that loss. Even the embers of the fire are dying. In sum, as the opening of Part II describes, Christabel lives in a 'world of death.' (l. 333) This is not a stable social structure, although Coleridge has chosen for its setting feudal society, which is, on the surface at least, probably the most hierarchical social structure of western history.

The liminal experience is characterized as being removed from time and space. Christabel leaves her home to go to the forest in the middle of the night. When she prays – since she has to leave home to do so - one wonders what she is praying for, and whether she isn't rather conjuring rather than praying: why does she need to leave home to pray for 'the weal of her lover'? Immediately upon Christabel's utterance, Geraldine appears and threshold imagery abounds. Geraldine appears 'on the other side' of the oak tree. (l. 56) The two women must cross a moat and a threshold with an iron gate. Geraldine reaches out her hand, entreating Christabel to do so, thus meeting her half way. To look at Geraldine as she undresses, Christabel raises herself 'half-way from the bed.' (l. 242) Geraldine herself is ambiguous: 'Deep from within she seems half-way/ To lift some weight with sick assay.' (ll. 257-58) If Geraldine and Christabel are from two different worlds, it is at a midpoint, liminal world that they connect.

After Geraldine's appearance is described in ambiguous imagery that is characteristic of the liminal experience, Christabel bonds with her, not after Geraldine's first appeals on the basis of her station and lineage (patrilineal), but in true sympathy (*communitas*) for a fellow beleaguered female. The pair's crossing the threshold together further this ritual and their sharing a bed marks the consummation of the *communitas* bond. The ambivalence Christabel feels toward Geraldine reflects the dual nature of the transformative process of the liminal experience.

While I do not ascribe to Hazlitt's assessment that there was 'something disgusting at the bottom' of *Christabel*, it is clear that the narrator offers too many warnings for the encounter to be read as representing a mystical experience, which is almost exclusively described in terms of pleasure. People describing such experiences commonly discern a blurring of the polarities of pain and pleasure, but the pain is always a kind of 'ecstatic' pain, a sense that the intensity of the pleasure is almost unbearable. In *Christabel*, however, there is a sense of real danger, expressed by the narrator and indicated by the actions of Christabel herself.

An important characteristic of liminality is that its resulting *communitas* is dangerous to the status quo. Geraldine's ambivalent nature reflects the liminal experience. She is beautiful and alluring, yet the narrator and Christabel find her threatening. The lamia quality of Geraldine also parallels the liminal figures, especially in initiation rites, which are often half-human half animals or

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otherwise monstrous. (*Dramas* 239)

Ironically, Geraldine seems to play on patriarchal values to appeal to both Christabel and later to Leoline. At first she cites her lineage, but as a wronged maiden, she is able to commence a *communitas* bond with Christabel. This bond goes beyond that of any obligations of social order. Then Geraldine appeals to both Leoline's sense of duty as a feudal host and to his patriarchal duties to protect a damsel in distress. But it is to the estrangement with Sir Roland that inspires Leoline to action.

Liminality is the realm between two positions or conditions, the betwixt and between realm, where the rules and boundaries of the social order are nonexistent. It is inherently egalitarian, spontaneous, and ambiguous. It can be characterized by use of metaphors and paradoxical imagery, such as oxymora and synesthesia. In formal ritual it can involve actual or psychological separation from the group, or removal of the trappings of rank (such as shedding garments or insignia, perhaps donning the attire of the socially inferior). 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial... liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.'^[7]

Liminal figures are often represented as having nothing, disguised as monsters, or depicted as naked, passive or humble. (*Ritual* 95) In patrilineal societies, matrilineal ancestors are sometimes given attributes associated with liminality. For example, the mother's brother may have magical powers. Moreover, the matrilineal side is associated with kindness, or *communitas*. So mother images often represent *communitas* in the liminal experience. At the same time, these figures are represented often as being 'vindictive' or 'jealous' since 'it is the mothers... who introduce divisions into the ideal unity of patrilineage.' (*Ritual* 116) That the figure of Geraldine has some relation to Christabel's dead mother seems beyond dispute.

Though it is uncertain how Coleridge would have resolved the story of Christabel, various accounts suggest that the ending would have been a happy one.^[8] Derwent Coleridge insisted that Geraldine was not malicious but a 'spirit, executing her appointed task with the best good will.'^[9] Perhaps the embers that flared up as Geraldine passed were not harbingers of evil but of the new life that Geraldine was bringing to both Christabel and Sir Leoline. Christabel greets the new day smiling as well as weeping, smiling 'As infants at a sudden light!' And Sir Leoline, who has been described as ailing, 'forgot his age' when he hears the name of Sir Roland and becomes impassioned and resolved to defend the maiden and reconcile with his childhood friend.

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It is curious that the incongruities in *Christabel* are so difficult for readers to accept, for such incongruities have become something of a critical truism for so much of Romantic poetry. But *Christabel* is concerned with a rite of passage rather than a moment of mystical transcendence. Christabel's encounter and any transformation we may envision for her are less of a spiritual and more of a private and, at the same time, a sociological nature. Chances are very, very good that Christabel would have survived to take part once again in society—despite, or perhaps because of, her experience with Geraldine.

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^[1] Still the best comprehensive book on mystical experiences is William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1936).

- [2] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Hogarth, 1930); Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1964).
- [3] There is much material on this subject. See, for example, James H. Austin, M. D., *Zen and the Brain* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998).
- [4] Thomas R. Preston, 'Christabel and the Mystical Tradition,' *Essays and Studies in Language and Literature*, Ed. Herbert H. Petit, (Louvain: Duquesne U P, 1964): 138-157.
- [5] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974, p. 13.
- [6] Victor Turner, 'Symbols in African Ritual' *Science* 179 (March 1972): 1100-1105.s
- [7] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine P, 1968) 95.
- [8] James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Pickering, 1838) 283, 301-02.
- [9] Quoted in Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* (New York: Braziller, 1971) 356.