

CHRISTABEL'S COMPLEXITY: COLERIDGE'S VIEW OF SCIENCE, NATURE AND THE
SUPERNATURAL

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's unfinished poem, "Christabel," follows the meeting and interaction of a young maiden and a deceptive demonesque woman. This paper explores the interactions between the natural, supernatural, and artificial elements found in the characters and setting of the poem. Coleridge weaves these elements together, oftentimes connecting them to each other in complex ways, instead of simply putting them in opposition to each other. This paper uses evidence from Coleridge's personal notebooks, essays, and letters along with this analysis of the poem to reflect his cautious acceptance of the changes brought on by the scientific and industrial revolution in the British Romantic era.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
THE NATURAL BEHAVING UNNATURALLY.....	6
THE SUBLIME AND THE SUPERNATURAL.....	16
MAN AND THE ARTIFICIAL.....	20
CONCLUSION.....	24
REFERENCES	26

INTRODUCTION

The British Romantic period saw significant changes in politics, science, technology and industry, impacting writers of the period, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His unfinished poem, “Christabel,” reflects shifting sentiment regarding these changes. Coleridge carefully planned out the epic poem, “Christabel,” though never finished it before his death in 1834. He began writing the first part of the poem in 1797 and continued writing the second part in 1800, not achieving the five part epic he had originally envisioned. While the years surrounding his time writing “Christabel” were marked by great political and social upheaval, those were not the only issues with which Coleridge and other Romantic writers were concerned. The Romantic period also introduced rapid advances in science, including a changing definition of science from a “natural philosophy” and an industrial revolution that began in Great Britain and ended up spanning the globe. Because ideas and the language surrounding science and industry were changing dramatically at the time, British Romantics, Coleridge included, were impacted by and reacted to these changes.

In his unfinished poem, Coleridge writes about the mysterious meeting of and interaction between two women that exposes Romantic ideas regarding the interactions of humans, nature, and the supernatural world. His approach weaves these ideas together rather than just putting them in opposition to each other as binaries, offering a more complex view of how the natural, the supernatural, and artificial or manmade were viewed in the Romantic period. By exploring the relationships between the natural, supernatural and artifice in the two parts of “Christabel” that Coleridge was able to finish, readers can locate and understand his allusions to the newly emerging industry and changes in scientific thought in the Romantic period and its effect on nature; specifically, that the artificial, supernatural, and the natural were not in opposition to each

other, but able to co-exist in a complex relationship with no part being wholly good nor wholly evil. By weaving together these seemingly unlike ideas, Coleridge creates a sense of unease in “Christabel” to reflect his concerns about advances in science and industry and the struggle that comes with accepting these changes. The complexity of the interaction of the supernatural, natural and artificial in the poem mirrors the complexity of Romantics feelings toward and their reluctant acceptance of the industrial and scientific revolutions that occurred during the Romantic period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Romantic period saw drastic social and political changes and shifts in thinking. It was the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment or Age of Reason – a period marked by rational thought and a separation of church and state, upending the idea that politics and religion should be inherently linked and that government should be moralized. Because of the emergence of The Age of Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century, Romantic scholars often focus on politics as one of the main inspirations for Romantic “poets, [who] became active in political activities that had no poetic precedence, for they lived in an age of democratic revolution, engaged in political dissent, and identified with people” (Gaul 109). Aligning with this idea, “Christabel” has been viewed as a critique of the political shifts in Europe, specifically the French revolution. Andrea Henderson argues that “Christabel” reflects a fear of revolution, and that the way Geraldine acts as a “threat to the family reflects the dangers the middle class’s ‘own’ revolution presented to itself” (884). Similarly, James Mulvihill focuses on the character of Geraldine, asserting she “has the paradoxical effect of naturalizing danger by defamiliarizing nature” (254), and her presence and invasion of Christabel’s person is connected to Coleridge’s fear of invasion. Although I agree with his assertion that she “defamiliariz[es] nature,” I’d like to think that this has more to do with nature and less with invasion. While political shifts in the Romantic period inarguably influenced Coleridge, his emphasis on nature and the sense of unease he creates by connecting it to the supernatural and the artificial speaks more to his ideas regarding scientific and industrial changes than political changes alone.

The supernatural elements of the poem have led some scholars to explore the Gothicism of the poem and whether or not it speaks to a greater mythology. Abe Delson explores how Geraldine’s function in the poem relates to the Gothic tradition, specifically whether or not she is

evil or “under the control of some providential agent” (130). Similarly, Lawrence Berkoben analyzes “Christabel” in terms of “good versus evil” by exploring lightness and darkness of how Christabel and Geraldine are represented, respectively. He suggests that Coleridge presents a binary, but is unable to come to a specific conclusion regarding a larger ethical and moral dilemma. Berkoben’s inability to come to a final conclusion based on the binary presented is similar to my idea that the poem is far more complex than it seems. While I agree that the characters of Christabel and Geraldine should be explored as complex entities who are not entirely what they appear to be, I am interested in more than how they fit in the Gothic tradition, as their roles seem to allude to larger issues. Scholars John Barth, Anthony John Harding and William A. Ulmer, have focused on how Christabel speaks to a greater mythology, specifically a Christian mythology, in which Christabel’s “moral innocence” is corrupted by Geraldine (Ulmer 378), likening it to the “fall of man” tale in the bible. Coleridge’s supernatural elements do harken to the Gothic tradition and, perhaps, a larger mythology such as Christianity, but the reductive binary that most of these scholars’ views present do not captivate the complexity that Coleridge approaches and explores by weaving the supernatural, natural and artificial worlds together and making them neither completely good nor completely evil.

Because of the female characters and gendered language, some scholars have taken a feminist approach to Coleridge’s “Christabel.” Jerrod Hogle suggests that “Christabel” uses Gothic women “types” to contest how women were “defined and either vindicated or regulated” (25), perhaps arguing for the complexity of women and women characters. While I agree with his assertion that the women characters are complex, the value of their roles expose larger issues about the complexity of accepting the scientific and industrial revolutions. Anya Taylor argues Coleridge’s feminist tendencies (resulting from his witnessing of the poor treatment of his sister)

are reflected in “‘Christabel’ as a stud[y] of violent passions in women, the absorption of women’s identities, and the potential collapse of their independent agency...Christabel’s isolation is essential to Coleridge’s experiment” (721). A feminist perspective is a valuable approach to take because of Coleridge’s purposeful use of women as the main characters and because of his gendered language in reference to the natural, supernatural, and artificial worlds; however, he “uses” the characters and gendered language as tools to create a sense of unease that highlights the larger issue related to the complexity of the interconnectedness of the natural, supernatural, and artificial worlds in ways that extend beyond their connection to women and feminism only.

THE NATURAL BEHAVING UNNATURALLY

Like other Romantics, Coleridge was concerned with the social and political issues of the time, but also remained intrigued by defining nature and by the sciences. His awareness and concerns can be found throughout his notes and letters, which exposed his vast interest in the sciences. His particularly close relationship to Humphry Davy, a scientist whose chemistry lectures Coleridge attended and wrote about in his notebooks in 1802 also shows inspiration and contemplation of science in the romantic period. The following passage was written after an incredibly detailed account of Davy's lecture and experiments performed: "Strength of Feeling connected with vividness of Idea – Davy at the Lectures. Jan. 28, 1802/gave a spark with the Electric machine—I felt nothing—he then gave a very vivid spark with the Leyden Phial – & I distinctly felt the shock" (*Notebooks* 1099). Although fragmented, Coleridge's notes show that he was moved by Davy's lecture and experiments, and they inspired a deeper reverence for science as a whole. By returning to his original notes, letters and essays, I was able to more clearly see his cautious reverence for the sciences; his immediate reaction ignited a dramatic and awe-filled interest in the sciences, and his later letters and notes discuss his desire to explore the sciences in a more in-depth way and to consider their application and connection to man and intellect. Coleridge's passion for the sciences was rooted in philosophy, arising "from a desire to understand the links between perceiver and perceived....Coleridge spent his life searching for the laws within the impalpable, within poems, within persons, within social systems, and for the relation of those things without us" (Coburn 91). The desire to better understand these relationships lead to Coleridge's contemplation of what he knew about nature and our relationship to it.

Coleridge creates a sense of uncertainty and unease in “Christabel” to complicate what is known to be “natural,” affecting our perception of the natural, supernatural, and artificial and their relationship to us and to each other. 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! / And hark, again! the crowing cock, / How drowsily it crew” (258). From the start, nature is turned on its head, behaving in “unnatural” ways, with the cock awaking in the middle of the night to crow – “drowsily,” as if still close to being asleep, unlike the confident and noisy call it would naturally make in the morning. Like this passage, the poem is full of contradictions and complications, making the reader suspicious of what is happening in the poem, and on larger scale, suspicious of what they feel they already know of the natural, supernatural, and artificial/manmade worlds.

Science acted as a neutral space for Coleridge to explore the connections between man and nature, as it changed in the Romantic period from being a “natural philosophy,” or something to be pondered, to science – a new, concrete landscape of experiments, facts, and results. This coincides with the ideas of the “Age of Reason” emerging in the Romantic period – that knowledge is rooted in rationality, reason and logic and does not simply come from God and the bible. This was a break from the previously held ideas about the “chain of being,” where God lies at the top, with man following behind to master all the earth (but in a specific order – animals, plants, then minerals). The scientific revolution caused Romantics to think differently about the “natural” order of things and how they interact.

This was an upset in how nature was to be approached, and Coleridge’s “desire to understand the links between perceiver and perceived” (Coburn 91) connect with his views of

nature and how it is defined. In the *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Kate Rigby explains the complexity of the term, “nature” in the Romantic period:

Nature was variously dissected and mathematized in search of its underlying ‘laws’; commodified as property to be exploited in the generation of wealth; aestheticized as ‘landscape’; moralized as a mode of being to which...we should ‘return’; revered, either as God’s good creation, or, more controversially, as the physical aspect of the godhead; and politicized, both by conservatives, as warranting the preservation of traditional social hierarchies, and by radicals, as legitimating revolution in pursuit of the ‘rights of man.’
(62-63)

Her explanation highlights the complexity of the idea of and the term “Nature” that Romantics were dealing with, noting their awareness of nature as a “scientific” object or commodity to be used and explored, connecting to man in their use of nature to create artificial/manmade things, and as a subject of reverence and inspiration, connecting man to the supernatural.

Coleridge deals with these varied versions of nature in the poem, by complicating what is typically thought to be natural and unnatural. He purposely creates confusion and unease in the poem to highlight the complexity of what the “natural” is in both setting and character (and to upset any pre-existing positive or negative associations that may have been held in regards to nature), especially with the characters of Christabel and Geraldine. Initially, Christabel is unsuspecting of Geraldine and her intentions. Her innocence and naivety allow her to trust Geraldine, despite the suspicious circumstances of their meeting. Geraldine is described as:

a damsel bright,
Dressed in a silken robe of white...
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;

Her blue-veined feet unsandaled were. (259)

Her white garment and implicated nakedness of her arms, neck and feet speak to the idea of purity and innocence that she announces when she first speaks to Christabel, claiming to be a “maid forlorn” (260), stolen by warriors and left in this forest. Although she seems to be innocent, Geraldine’s introduction is complicated by a sense of unease, as Coleridge follows her description with “twas frightful there to see / A lady so richly clad as she” (259) and further calls her “The lady strange” (260). She clearly is not all that she appears to be; an innocent maid would hardly be considered frightful or strange – although the circumstances that lead an innocent maid into the forest at night might be strange (and the same could be said for Christabel’s presence there as well). Coleridge’s use of confusing her innocence by also calling her frightful and strange implies that she is something to be feared and not just pitied. Geraldine and Christabel’s presence in the forest is also confusing as that is not where one would expect a lady to be alone in the middle of the night. These characters immediately defy expectations of what is “natural.”

Christabel takes pity on Geraldine and invites the stranger into her father’s home, where she finds that Geraldine is, in fact, a monster. Although Coleridge never explicitly says that Geraldine is a lamia, he describes her as having a “bosom cold” (268) and the Bard’s later vision of the snake strangling the dove is an allusion to the events occurring between Geraldine and Christabel – with Geraldine being the snake-like figure. The vision is an allusion to the rape of Christabel as the Bard claims that the dove is “callest by thy own [Sir Leoline, Christabel’s father] daughter’s name” (270). Later, Geraldine’s eyes are compared to those of a serpent: “A snake’s small eye blinks dull and shy; / And the lady’s eyes they shrunk in her head, / Each shrunk up to a serpent’s eye” (271). The descriptions of Geraldine have lead Romantic scholars

to conclude that she was a lamia – a snakelike woman who preyed on innocents. According to the OED, a lamia is “supposed to have the body of a woman, and to prey upon human beings.” The definition of what Geraldine is explicitly states that what this supernatural being is depends on her ability to appear to be not what she seems; she appears to be an innocent human woman in order to prey on humans and is, in fact, a monster. Only after Geraldine has entered Christabel’s father’s home does she reveal her true identity:

Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
Behold! Her bosom and half her side—
A sight to dream of, not to tell! (264).

Geraldine’s “transformation” is terrifying and reactionary – as if she is being overtaken by the monster side of her; she is hunched over, eyes rolling, shuddering, almost animalistic and definitely not the innocent she originally seemed to be. This representation of a creature who is supernatural and monstrous, but also of nature as humans and snakes are of nature suggests that the new understandings of nature and alterations to it (through science and industry) may not be so easy to judge and understand.

Geraldine is “A sight to dream of, not to tell!” (264), occupying a space that is neither here nor there; Coleridge leaves out explicit explanations of what she is, perhaps because she can’t or shouldn’t be described. She fills many roles, yet none completely. She appears to be innocent, but is not. She appears to be human, but occupies a very supernatural role and simultaneously takes on animalistic qualities. She appears to be a woman, but in the bard’s

vision, she is a snakelike male entity. She entrances and invokes pity from Christabel, and later is despicable to Christabel while enrapturing Sir Leoline. Her presence is the catalyst for any and all action the poem; it wouldn't progress without her. The slipperiness of her being furthers the complexity that Coleridge is attempting to create in the poem and maybe most clearly shows his reaction to the scientific and industrial revolution – disgusting and evil, yet interesting and exciting and absolutely necessary for progress.

Although women are the central actors in his poem – the story and action depending on them, the effects of their meeting and their subsequent relationship, Coleridge also applies gendered language to other natural and supernatural elements and environments in the poem, adding another layer of complexity to the analysis of the natural, supernatural and artificial worlds. It can be seen as reductive to assume that women have an inherent connection to the natural world, but Coleridge makes an explicit link between women and nature – primarily in the assumed innocence and corruption of both—to create uneasiness as the women interact in ways that have the potential to make his audience feel unsettled. In her text, *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, Kate Soper notes that nature has often been associated with the feminine and connects the treatment of nature to the treatment of women – specifically in that it is viewed in a variety of ways, just as Romantics viewed nature in a variety of ways. Soper argues that “Nature has been represented as a woman in two rather differing sense...nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. Nature is both the generative source, but also the potential spouse of science, to be wooed, won, and if necessary forced to submit to intercourse” (“Idea” 141). Here again, nature is, like women, something that is consumable and corruptible, but also revered and respected, mirroring the complicated ways that the Romantics viewed

nature. Coleridge purposefully genders the various worlds he explores in the poem and upsets traditional gender expectations. This creates a sense of unease that further complicates the interaction of natural, supernatural and artificial/manmade worlds.

Coleridge complicates this feminine/good masculine/evil binary in the interaction of Christabel and Geraldine. Christabel's innocence is lost at the viewing of Geraldine's transformation into the lamia and the following "capture," of sorts, as she "lay down by the Maiden's side! -- / And in her arms the maid she took" (264), becoming "the lovely lady's prison" (265). This unfolding seduction and capture in Christabel's bedchamber suggests a sexual encounter between the women and Christabel's loss of innocence. This suggested sexual encounter occurring between two women further blurs readers expectations of the heteronormativity of women characters at the time. Coleridge uses Christabel and Geraldine's interactions and relationships to further reader's uncertainty and suspicions about what "natural" is and whether it is good or evil. While femininity has traditionally been associated with innocence and purity, Coleridge's poem contradicts that idea; both good and evil, both innocence and knowledge exist in female characters and feminine-seeming things. The complexity in the character of the two women – what they seem to be and actually are – compares to the idea that the natural world is also incredibly complex in how it is perceived; nature isn't strictly positive or negative, and the changing relationship with nature in the Romantic period, then, should not be seen as strictly positive or strictly negative either.

Coleridge continues to use gendered language to describe the natural elements acting on each other, further complicating the feminine/good masculine/evil binaries. At the beginning of the poem, the setting is described: "naught was green beneath upon the oak / But moss and rarest mistletoe" (259). The oak tree would typically be seen as male gendered, based on its phallic

form, yet is acted upon by mistletoe – according to the OED, a symbol of male virility. This creates unease in that it is a male entity being acted on by another male-gendered symbol – contradicting the heteronormativity that would have been considered “natural” during the Romantic period. While most of the natural imagery is feminine (and some non-gendered), much of it is still controlled by a male presence – except the actual interaction between Christabel and Geraldine. For example, the Bard’s “vision” in Part II relays the story of Geraldine and Christabel through using natural imagery associated with femininity, but since it originated in a male character’s dream, he remains the controlling force. The Bard explains his dream: “I stooped, methought, the dove to take, / When lo! I saw a bright green snake / Coiled around its wings and neck” (270). Within the dream, the dove (a figure of innocence, purity, and peacefulness associated with Christianity, and in some ways, feminine characteristics) is strangled by a snake (serpent associated with Satan – a masculine figure). This idea that the feminine natural world is acted on and in some ways corrupted by the masculine reflects the idea that patriarchal forces have corrupted the feminine natural world, though Coleridge’s perspective is much more nuanced than that.

While gendered and feminized nature is important in the poem, these concepts extend beyond the essentialist ideas that women represent nature and are corrupted by the more masculine and patriarchal science and industry. Kate Soper notes that:

Many have remarked on the analogies between the domination of nature and the oppression of women. Fewer have noted the equivocation in the mother-virgin-lover imagery, which is surely expressive of the conflicting feelings that ‘real’ nature has induced in ‘men.’ If Nature is, after all, both mother and maid, this surely reflects a genuine tension between the impulse to dominate and the impulse to be nurtured. The

urge to feminize nature contains within it, that is, something of the contrariness of attitude that is inspired by the interaction with it. (Soper "Idea" 142)

Coleridge's use of a female character corrupting another female character, along with the sense of unease created throughout the poem speaks to a more complex view than simply feminine/good and masculine/bad binary. Coleridge's poem was not equating women with nature for the sake of showing explicit corruption by science and industry, but equating women with nature as a tool to highlight the complexities of the Romantic world's changing relationship with science and industry. This aligns with Soper's idea that "Feminized nature is not therefore emblematic simply of mastered nature, but also of regrets and guilts over the mastering itself; of nostalgias felt for what is lost or defiled in the very act of possession; and of the emasculating fears inspired by her awesome resistance to seduction" (Soper "Idea" 143). The women in the poem behave in ways that seem "unnatural" to make the readers question what is natural or unnatural and whether or not our relationship with the natural and our view of it is strictly positive or negative. Coleridge's point is that the changes in science and industry and how nature is perceived and understood during the Romantic period are incredibly complex, should not be oversimplified, and, perhaps, should be embraced warily as a necessary evil.

Coleridge adds another layer of complexity and confusion in the character of Sir Leoline, who is one of the only male characters featured in the poem. The morning after her capture and corruption, Christabel leads Geraldine to meet her father, Sir Leoline. He immediately becomes enamored of Geraldine and claims to get revenge on the men she claimed kidnapped her at the beginning of the poem. He ironically says that he will "dislodge their reptile souls / From the bodies and forms of men!" although it is actually Geraldine that is a reptilian, corruptive being (268). After he hears the Bard's vision of the snake corrupting the dove, Leoline incorrectly

assumes that Geraldine is “Lord Roland’s [Geraldine’s father] beauteous dove,” becoming further entranced in Geraldine (271). Christabel begs her father to send away Geraldine, as she has seen Geraldine’s true form; however, he submits “all his hospitality / To the wronged daughter of his friend” (272), eventually “turning from his own sweet maid, / The aged knight, Sir Leoline, / Led forth the lady Geraldine!” (273). The act of turning away from his own family for a woman that he’s just met might be seen as an unnatural occurrence, especially since his family name is “Leoline” – the root derived from Latin means lion – a species known for its strong family bonds. His name being connected to an animal—lion—further complicates the “natural” order of the males controllers of the pride. Sir Leoline’s blind trust in Geraldine suggests that she has gained some sort of power over him – perhaps a nod to her supernatural powers—but also subverting the “natural” dynamics of males being powerful in nature (as in a lion’s pride) and the traditional patriarchal format that would have existed in an aristocratic society – which can be assumed this is given Leoline’s title of Sir and Christabel’s title of Lady. This upset in the “natural order” of the relationship between men and women works to upset what the reader knows of nature, what is natural, and man’s changing relationship with nature.

Part II of “Christabel is even more complicated and confusing; Coleridge often switches from one character’s perspective to another as Sir Leoline tries to understand Geraldine’s story, Christabel’s fear of Geraldine, and the Bard’s vision, noting a “dizzy trance” (271, 272) in more than one occasion. Not only is Leoline confused at which of the women are good and evil, his ironic misunderstanding and the fast-paced switch from character to character complicates and confuses their roles for the reader – further complicating what they believe to be natural and unnatural and how they should feel about them.

THE SUBLIME AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Although he studied the work of many scientists, Coleridge was particularly impressed and influenced by the work of Dr. Erasmus Darwin, particularly for his ability to “unite chemistry and versification” (Coburn 84), in such works as *The Botanic Garden*, which is literally poetry about science. Darwin’s reverence for science and nature was reflected in his use of poetry and a belief that “links...all aspects of the cosmos and the human mind” (Coburn 85). Coleridge admired Darwin’s work, often quoting it in his notebooks, with his annotations to the material, and even proposed writing a “Hymn to Dr Darwin—in the manner of the Orphics” as a projected or potential writing idea (*Notebooks* 174). His admiration of Darwin’s artistic approach to science was reflected in his notes: “Dr. Darwin’s Poetry, ~~makes~~ a succession of Landscapes or Paintings—it arrests the attention too often, and so prevents the rapidity necessary to pathos.—it ~~com~~ makes the great little” (*Notebooks* 132). Darwin’s ability to meld science and poetry (as the human mind and intelligence are innately connected to all other elements of the natural world) mirrors, in a way, Coleridge’s ideas surrounding nature, inspiration, and imagination and their inherent link to each other. Although Coleridge wasn’t the first or only Romantic to use nature as inspiration, his discussion in the *Biographia Literaria* shows how he explicitly thought about and considered nature, particularly how it connects to humanity, imagination and poetry:

Now the sum of all that is merely objective, we will henceforth call Nature, confining the term to its passive and material sense, as compromising the phenomena by which its existence is made known to us. On the other hand the sum of all that is subjective, we may comprehend in the name of the self or intelligence. (*Vol I* 254-255)

To Coleridge, nature was an object that was consumed both literally through its use and manipulation in industry, and figuratively through simply viewing and experiencing its wonders. It is this figurative consumption of nature as a spectacle or thing to be experienced that connects nature to the supernatural. He links nature and thought as two worlds that exist concurrently and hints to the possibility of the coexistence of nature and thought; here is where the natural leads to the “supernatural,” in what Coleridge might say is the soul, inspiration or imagination existing concurrently with the natural – the sublime. Romantics, Coleridge included, were aware of the idea of sublimity and the effect that the aesthetic could have on the emotions or imaginations of audiences consuming an image of nature. This explanation is often credited to Edmund Burke and his work *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Jarvis 178). The sublime relates to a solitary experience of incredibly elevated “feelings and sensations aroused by certain kinds of natural landscapes and natural phenomena... ‘a delightful horror’” (Jarvis 179). Sublimity, then, acts as a supernatural force in the poem, as nature acts to take the poet, characters and readers into an “elevated” space in different ways, including the unease created by his unusual descriptions of natural elements and occurrences. The poem opens by describing the scene in which Christabel meets Geraldine:

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. (258)

This passage makes little sense given expectations of what “night” naturally is – dark. Although he claims that the night is not dark – leading the reader to believe the light of the moon is making the forest “not dark,” he describes the cloud-covered moon as being “small and dull” (258), further complicating what is natural and forcing the reader to question what this environment might look like and what might be contributing to the eerie “this but not that” light and feeling. As he discussed when planning out his poems, he casts the natural setting here in a different light to change the feeling and set the scene for the action of the story, elevating the reader into an eerie, supernatural place. The unnatural behavior of the natural world in this description invokes the supernatural and creates a sense of unease in the reader, continuing to complicate what is known of how the natural world behaves.

Following his explanation of nature and thought in Chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge discusses how his and William Wordsworth’s plans for *Lyrical Ballads* developed, believing that

poetry [had] the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. (*Vol II 5*)

In writing “Christabel” and his other mystery poems (“Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”), Coleridge is fully aware of his use of describing the natural in an unnatural or “colorful” way to create a supernatural feeling in his poetry. He further explains that in planning his writing for *Lyrical Ballads*, “it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to

persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth” (*Biographia Literaria Vol. II* 6-7). Coleridge was purposefully using the combination of the natural and supernatural to create some sort of a truth or reality for his audience about more than just the characters and images in the poem, but a distorted reflection, of sorts, about the world around them.

The passages and descriptions of the natural as unnatural in the poem not only create unease and complicate our understanding of the natural, but have supernatural qualities as well. Because it is part of the gothic tradition, the supernatural appears explicitly in the poem (Geraldine as lamia and Christabel’s mother’s shroud or ghost, for example), but Coleridge often creates a supernatural feeling in his descriptions of the natural world. For example, Geraldine’s transformation from human woman into the lamia alludes to and complicates the connection between the natural and supernatural. The natural has the ability to elevate people into the sublime – an otherworldly and positive kind of supernatural. Geraldine’s animalistic-like transformation is natural (in that it takes her back to a “natural” state – that of a snake), but is also terrifying; she is both natural (in form) and supernatural in her abilities to deceive, transform, and absolutely corrupt. This transformation and deception shows that the natural is not necessarily a peaceful, revered thing, but one that is terrifying as well. The “unnaturalness” of the natural elements in the poem have an aura of the supernatural by taking the reader out of the poem and into Coleridge’s “truth,” particularly his conflict in dealing with the changing world around him. By weaving together the natural, artificial, and supernatural, Coleridge creates unease that mirrors his ideas about the co-existence of these concepts – that they exist in a unity, of sorts, and that changes are necessary and inevitable, but should be approached warily.

MAN AND THE ARTIFICIAL

Coleridge was not only interested in writing about science and nature; he wanted to immerse himself in it. In 1796, Coleridge suggested to Thomas Poole that he would be interested in “study[ing] Chemistry & Anatomy,” so that he could later “commence a School...proposing to *perfect* them in the following studies... Man as Animal...Man as an *Intellectual* Being...Man as a Religious Being” (*Collected Letters* 124). His interest in science and plans to teach others in this particular way speaks to the sense of “wholeness” he was interested in creating – a unity, in a sense, between science, nature, man, and religion. His interest in using science to study man as animal, intellectual, and religious being connects to the ideas reflected in *Christabel* – that man is inherently connected to the natural (and through the natural, also connected to the supernatural); by consuming the natural and altering the natural into the artificial and manmade, man is also changing their relationship to the natural and supernatural in complex ways that are neither wholly good nor wholly bad.

The awareness and concern with how nature and the environment was treated and defined was of particular importance to the Romantics; the understanding that man was inherently linked to nature in a variety of ways and that their actions would impact nature lends itself to the idea that Romantics were quite ecologically minded. This view of nature relies on its connection to humanity – similar to ecocritic Lawrence Buell’s ideas about ecology and humanity that: “The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell 7). They are innately connected – humans are a part of nature and should be considered “natural” or part of the ecosystem. Buell suggests that man began to personify nature in the Romantic period, abandoning the idea that man was there to rule the earth (as the previously held Christian “Chain

of Being” suggests), and instead, began to see themselves as part of nature, that man and nature were linked (Buell 182-189). Part of this was the result of the scientific revolution, including the introduction of evolutionary theory and further studies in zoology and biology, in which scientists were able to more clearly see links and similarities between man and other species. Not only was man more visibly linked to the natural through science, but also through its rapidly growing consumption of nature during the industrial revolution – in which nature was rapidly being used and altered in different ways.

For the sake of this paper, I define the term “artificial” or “artifice” as the use of nature as a resource by transforming it into an “unnatural” form, although it can still maintain some of its natural qualities, such as the wildflower wine that Christabel and Geraldine drink upon their arrival to Christabel’s bedchamber. The previously mentioned definitions of nature show that there are many views on nature is “consumed,” and this is one of the most explicit explorations of it in the poem although Coleridge understood that nature can be consumed in other ways as well, especially as an aesthetic. The connection between artifice and the natural is innate, because the natural world supports the artificial as the artificial is created from the natural; however, the artificial elements in the poem also have an aura of the supernatural about them, as if humans altering natural commodities elevate the natural forms to a sublime.

Coleridge continues to allude to the supernatural in the artificial/manmade world by extending the sense of uncertainty into the artificial/manmade world as well through blurring the lines between what is natural and what is not. When Christabel first finds Geraldine, she is described as having “wildly glittered here and there / The gems entangled in her hair” (259). Gems quite literally come from the earth, the natural, but the fact that they are glittering wildly despite being seen at night under a moon described as “small and dull” (258), gives them a

supernatural quality and is perhaps an allusion to the glittering of scales that Christabel will find upon witnessing Geraldine's transformation. Coleridge continues to describe Geraldine's clothing as a: "silken robe of white, / that shadowy in the moonlight shone" (259). Silk is a natural fiber that has been made into a robe for Geraldine. The fact that it seems to shine is not necessarily natural of silk, but could be a nod to Geraldine as a supernatural figure, and definitely contributes to the idea that the natural is not what it seems.

Almost immediately Coleridge begins to plant the seed that the natural, supernatural, and artificial are connected in complex ways. The natural and artificial are linked as Coleridge's describes Christabel's bedchamber:

Carved with figures strange and sweet,
All made out of the carver's brain...
The lamp with twofold silver chain
Is fastened to an angel's feet. (262)

He makes sure to note that the carvings were created at the hands of man, created in his mind, from something natural – wood. He also describes the "content" of the carving as an angel – a supernatural character related to traditional Christian mythology. His purposeful description of the artificial connects man to nature, the artificial and the supernatural. Again, the word "strange" is used (as with Geraldine), nodding to something otherworldly and eerie, another element of supernatural connected to the natural and artificial. As the women continue to interact in the bedchamber, Christabel offers Geraldine "a wine of virtuous powers; / My mother made it of wild flowers" (262). Here, Coleridge makes an explicit connection between man, nature, artificial and supernatural. By explaining the wine's origins, he shows a "taming" of nature at the hands of her mother. She has also instilled it with "virtuous powers," which

highlights its ability to intoxicate and take the drinker to an otherworldly place – a connection to the supernatural. Only after drinking the wine is Geraldine exposed to Christabel as supernatural, further highlighting the wine's connection to the supernatural world in the poem. The artificial and supernatural are linked by their connection to humanity; man makes the artificial, and in some ways, through emotion and imagination, makes the supernatural.

CONCLUSION

Coleridge creates a mood of uncertainty and suspicion in the reader to highlight the complexity of the relationship between the supernatural, natural and artificial/manmade world by blurring these ideas, thus countering the idea that they merely stand in opposition to each other; rather, they are innately connected, sometimes working with and sometimes against each other. Romantics held the view that “the natural world as a place of vital sustenance and peaceful coexistence is complemented by its nightmare vision of a world threatened by imminent environmental catastrophe” (McCusick 29); Coleridge, though, creates a sense of unease in “Christabel” to reflect his concerns about industrialization and scientific advances at the time and the struggle that comes with accepting the changes. Scholars have noted that Coleridge was “[p]erhaps the single most important figure in the development of a full-fledged ecological consciousness in Britain and America [and that he] was the first of the English Romantics to articulate a holistic conception of poetic form and to relate this conception to the scientific concept of the organism” (McCusick 28). This relates to the idea of organic unity, in which all elements of the universe were interconnected in some way, and the impact of change of one part could be felt throughout, an idea that Coleridge was particularly interested in – how the interactions of nature, the supernatural and man (including their transformation of the natural into something artificial) were interconnected and very complex. In the conclusion to Part II, Coleridge admits “forc[ing] together thoughts so unlike each other” (273), alluding to his purposeful use of contradiction and complexity. His use of complexity among the natural, supernatural, and artificial in “Christabel” highlight an understanding that these are neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but elements of a whole world that interact and exist in some sort of unity. “Christabel” shows us that the study, alteration, and consumption of nature are not in

opposition to the reverence that it inspires. Humanity is a part of a very complex nature and our role in it should not be oversimplified, as everything is not always what it seems to be.

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