

The Compare and Contrast between “Christabel” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in Physical Surroundings

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ABSTRACT. “Christabel” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” are the two representative gothic poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the picturesqueness is the excellence of both. The physical surroundings of the tales shared some common characteristics of Gothic, but also have distinct features due to the different themes of each one. This paper aims to compare and contrast between this two Gothic poems of Coleridge in physical surroundings through four aspects: the environment in general; sensory stimulation; surroundings and hints of plots and characters; the prominence of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Gothic literature; Coleridge; Physical surroundings; Poem

1. ENVIRONMENT IN GENERAL

The physical surroundings of these two works have both similarities as Gothic poems and their distinct characteristics.

Generally speaking, the environment in “Christabel” is in a rather typical Gothic style, can be observed from the medieval settings: the time of midnight, the castle, wood. Furthermore, the picturesqueness of the environment considerably affects readers. The events are narrated “with all their appendages of sight and sound--the dim forest--the sudden flash of the dying embers--the echoing hall--the carved chamber, with its curiously elegant lamp--in short, all that enriches and adorns this tale, with a luxuriance of imagination seldom equaled” (Schwartz 118).

While the story of the ancient mariner happened in the sea with the various changes of the climate and mysteries, therefore, the physical surrounding in

AM is much more variable than in “Christabel”, for it has changed dramatically

from daytime to night within several stanzas, and a large part of the mysteries are caused by the amazing changes of the climates and surrounding scenes. As O'Malley claimed, “‘Ancient Mariner’ particularly highlights the power (and horrors) of the Gothic-as-supernatural...while ‘Christabel’ dwells upon the mysticism (and, again, horrors) of the Gothic-as-medieval”(327).

2. SENSORY STIMULATION

The physical surroundings of the two poems stimulate readers' sensory systems intensely. Aurally, Coleridge has created an eerie atmosphere by emphasizing silence in both two poems. Christabel “kneels beneath the huge oak-tree/And in silence prayeth she”(Coleridge 217). While in AM, “Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken--The ice was all between.”(Coleridge 189) Besides, the poet used descriptions to highlight the silence of the environment. For example, when describing the silent forest, there are the sounds from the castle clock, crowing cock and the voice of Christabel's pray. But the cock crews are “drowsily”(Coleridge 215), the howls are “not over loud” and for Christabel, “the sighs she heaved were soft and low”(Coleridge 216). The slight noises among the silence make the surroundings much more creepy. Meanwhile, in AM, when facing the world of ice, the sailors “did speak only to break The silence of the sea!”(Coleridge 190) It expresses the idea that the sailors have nothing to do when facing the vast sea. But compared to the AM, the combination of sounds and silence are embodied in “Christabel” more impressively because of the relatively constant atmosphere in it.

Visually, the light and shade contrast in AM is rather apparent. There are “bloody sun” “in a hot and copper sky” at noon, the gloomy sky with storm, the ice which is “as green as emerald”, the night which “through fog-smoke white, glimmered the white Moon-shine” or with “The death-fires” and water “burnt green, and blue and white” like oil. “Coleridge invests intense imaginative moments in his poetry with precisely this kind of light and richness of color” (Vlasopolos 365). Coleridge organized those surroundings in two important ways. On the one hand, the contrast changes of light and shade sometimes happened swiftly, even within a single stanza. On the other hand, different elements were organized together within a stanza, formulating a beautiful picture:

Her beams bemocked the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,
The charmed water burnt alway
A still and awful red.

(Coleridge 197)

The two means made the physical surrounding in the whole poem dynamic and pretty fit in with the plot, instead of being static as only a kind of background.

As for "Christabel", however, the contrast of light and shade is not that evident. The physical environment maintains to be dim and depressed, such as the dimly shone moon, the deadly burnt lamp and the drowsily crow. To say the reason for the distinctions the two poems have on this point, it is mainly about the themes. As storytelling about the old mariner's adventure on the sea, the relation between the theme and the environment is much stronger than in "Christabel".

3. SURROUNDINGS AS HINTS OF PLOT AND CHARACTERS

The physical surroundings in "Christabel" and AM both play an important role in suggesting the plot or the situation of the characters. In "Christabel", when the heroine brought Geraldine to the castle, there were some descriptions about the surroundings, such as "The mastiff old did not awake, Yet she an angry moan did make!" (Coleridge 221) Also, the chamber was "carved with figures strange and sweet" and "the lamp with twofold silver chain is fastened to an angel's feet" (Coleridge 222). These descriptions are not only helped to create a horrific atmosphere but are also symbols. The angry moan and the figures represent the attractive but dangerous Geraldine or the situation around Christabel. Also, the angel in the lamp is the innocent Christabel, while the "twofold silver chain" restricted her feet, implicating that the heroine had already fallen into the trap of the evil Geraldine. The environment predicted the following spell and Christabel's dream. Besides, after the dream, The night-birds all that hour were still.

But now they are jubilant anew,

From cliff and tower, tu-who! tu-who!

Tu-who! tu-who! from wood and fell!

(Coleridge 226)

The birds seemed revived and got rid of the previous dim mood, which suggested that the dream of Christabel also made her revived and somethings had been starting to change in this innocent girl because of Geraldine's spell.

In AM, the symbolism mostly embodies the mariner's character. "The Mariner's imagination changes the sea and snake from multiple mirrorings of his inner desolation to symbols, translucent with the light of the mind"(Vlasopolos 365). After he killed the albatross, the sun shone all day brightly long, and slimy things crawled upon the sea:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!

That ever this should be!

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs

Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout

The death-fires danced at night;

The water, like a witch's oils,

Burnt green, and blue and white.

(Coleridge 191)

While when the moon went up to the sky, "Softly she was going up, And a star or two beside"(Coleridge 197). The mariner felt relieved, and his heart was cleansed under the light of the moon, implicating that he was forgiven and the torture would stop.

4. THE PROMINENCE OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Both two poems are replete with the theme of sexuality. "Christabel first meets Geraldine in a sexually charged atmosphere" (Spatz 111). It is embodied in the

early spring, “ a time of growth and regeneration”, and the cock that is awakened at midnight. It seems like that a great stir was on its way. Furthermore, her first appearance was “on the other side” of “the huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree”. As O’Malley asserted, “the eruption of Gothic affect into this poem almost always occurs around the manifestations of female power or desire”(328).

While in the AM, the sexual allusions are shown either but in different ways. It is evident that the description of some natural things or objects in the poems has substantial implications about gender. “The mariner begins his tale in what he represents to us as a radically sexed universe.”(D, Hoeveler. 1992):

The Sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea.

(Coleridge 189)

In addition, the poem had put much focus on the ghost ship, Life-in-Death, who was in a female figure, “an association highlighted by Coleridge’s insistent use of female pronouns”(O’Malley 328).

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man’s blood with cold.

(Coleridge 194)

5. CONCLUSION

The physical surroundings of the two poems share some same features of Gothic but mostly different in the way of its presentation. In “Christabel, the story happened in a more medieval-like setting, while another one told the hallucinatory

experience of the mariner on the mysterious sea. On the aspect of sensory stimulation, “Christabel” created the eerie atmosphere through emphasizing silence, and AM focused more on the different effects of light and shade on the sea, which stimulated readers sense visually. Since the environment serves the theme of the whole story, there are some details in the surroundings of both poems playing as hints to imply the plot or situations of characters. The topic of sexuality and gender is a prominent feature of gothic literature. In both poems, the environment was always sexually charged. In AM, however, Coleridge expressed it uniquely, by labeling the objects in the environment as a male or female figure. The rhetoric effects it produced made some elements of physical surroundings mix up with figures, which shapes gothic literature more fascinatingly.

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