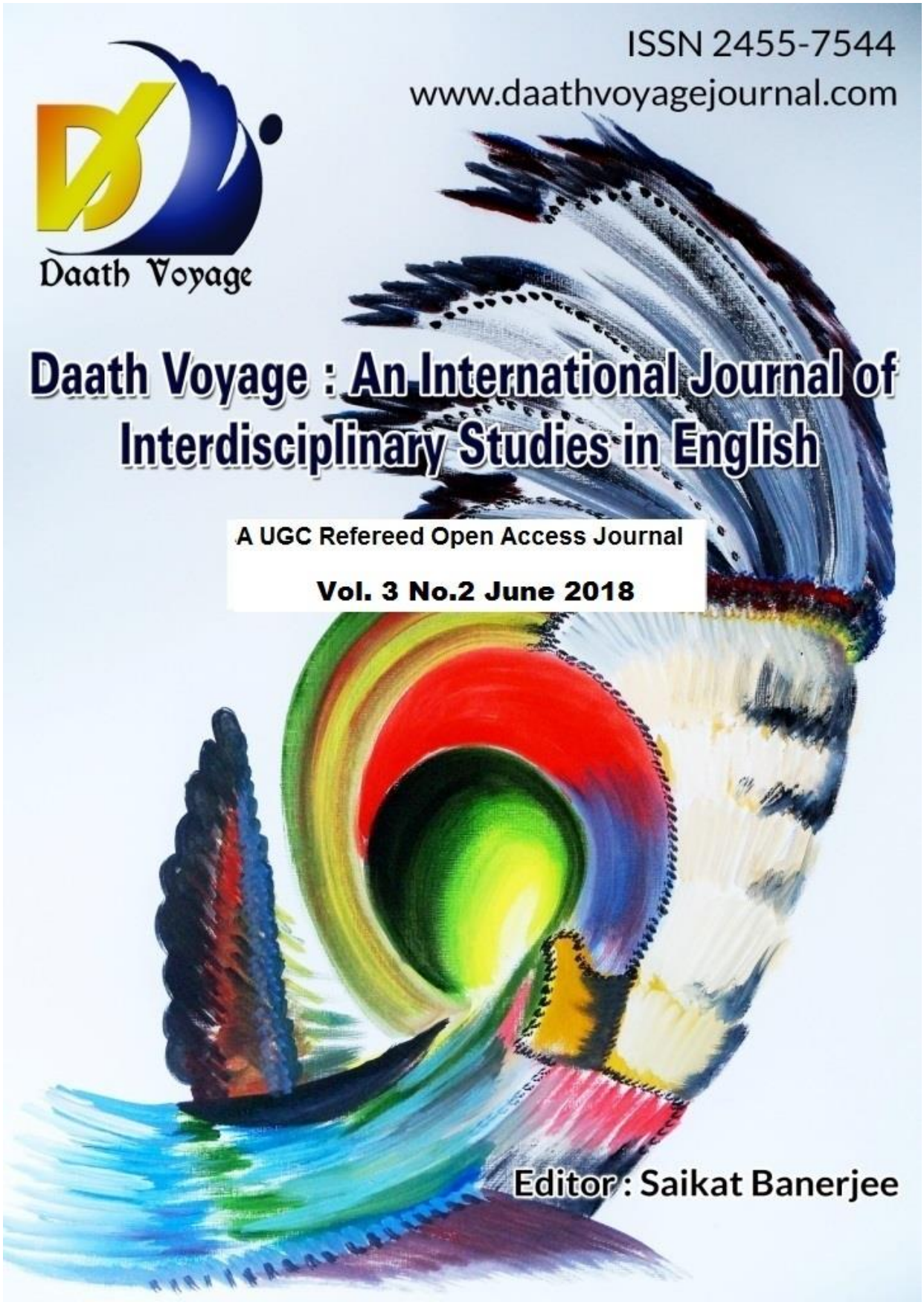

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Epiphany and the Politics of the Gaze:

A Comparative Study of Coleridge's and Joyce's Artistic Visions

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Abstract: This paper aims to study Geraldine in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Christabel* in the light of the concept of 'epiphany' as we find in the works of James Joyce. In the process, the paper intends to apply some feminist understanding on the characters of the poem and the novel. The focus of the paper lies on the character of Geraldine from Coleridge's *Christabel* while looking at the unnamed muse in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a foil. While presenting Coleridge's vision as a 'supernatural epiphany', this paper also acknowledges the differences in the visions of the two writers. The other focus of the paper lies on the psychoanalytical feminist approach of Laura Mulvey, which has been presented in association with some new considerations. This paper will also aim to provide a semblance of reconciliation between Joyce's aesthetic 'epiphany' and Coleridge's apparently 'demonic' vision.

Keywords: Epiphany, gaze, voyeurism, demonic, supernatural.

S. T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth published the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, marking the rise of the British Romantic Movement. Wordsworth's intended to portray the usual and everyday in the unusual and innovative light of imagination. Coleridge opted for something that would replace a sense of familiarity with an air of the supernatural, seeking

therefore to earn a readers's 'poetic faith' (Coleridge 2008, 86). The poems of Coleridge and Wordsworth in this way brought together

> …the two cardinal points of poetry, 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 colors of imagination (86).

The vision of Geraldine is often mentioned as an example of the Coleridgean element of the supernatural. If we take a look at Geraldine from a different perspective, keeping in mind the theory of imagination as propounded by Coleridge himself in his *Biographia Literaria*, we are bound do discover intriguing facets of this interesting and widely discussed, yet mysterious, figure.

So, who or what exactly is Geraldine? Is she the devil incarnate, a symbol of Satan? Is she an agent of the supernatural? Or, is she the epiphanic vision for Christabel? Does the appearance of Geraldine meet the definition of an epiphany, or should we look elsewhere in the poem for one? Is she the embodiment containing the 'real' objects of her prayer? Perhaps the deep desires of her inner psyche in flesh? We can only speculate. Throughout the poem, she remains mysterious. Her mystery is never unveiled despite a vague revelation of her social identity in part two of the poem. It is she who makes the poem an enigma, and it is this enigma that makes the poem still so appealing to the readers.

One quite obvious observation is that both in case of Coleridge and Joyce, the object of vision is essentially feminine. Both Geraldine and the unnamed Muse are exotic and wrapped up in a veil of mystery. In case of Joyce, he makes us see the Muse through the eyes of Stephen, thus bringing in the concept of the male gaze, keeping in mind the statements of Laura Mulvey in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, 1), and 'the Other', as stated by Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir, 26). In case of Coleridge, can we apply this same thematic model? If we are to take into consideration what the poet had to say in his *Biographia Literaria*, we will come to find a strange harmony in the order of things in *Christabel*. Whereas Christabel remains the 'lovely lady' (Coleridge 1996, 102), symbolic of finite mortal beauty, the suave, yet sinister Geraldine, on the other hand is 'beautiful exceedingly' (103), balancing out the finite by the mysterious, eternal or infinite, and therefore creates a sense of a strange harmonious binary.

According to Anya Taylor, in SEL (Studies in English Literature),

> Coleridge's opening section does to listeners what Geraldine does to Christabel: leaves them anxious and ungrounded. Critic after critic has tossed interpretations into the poem's Dark fluxion, all unfixable by thought. (Taylor, 707)

The poem thus attracts a multitude of interpretations that appear with varying claim to validity. Some see the heroine Christabel initiated into love; some see her as a more or less innocent Eve falling into the snares of a demon from preternatural realms or from Satan; some see the poem as having no meaning besides the complex contradictions of language and voice; as a Blakean examination of divided states of body and soul; as a dream or many dreams with condensed or displaced images; and even as a meditation on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. William Hazlitt called the poem 'the most obscene poem in the English language' (Koenig-Woodyard); Tom Moore thought its gaps showed incompetence (Moore). How do we cope with this tumult of uncertainty?

Geraldine's sudden appearance out of nowhere, almost as an answer to Christabel's prayers, might be interpreted as a fragmentation of self: the separation of the active, devious mind from the passive, pliant body. It is almost the reversal of the process of birth – an unnatural, surrogate mother coming to life in front of her child. Geraldine disrobes, exposing her bosom to Christabel and the placenta disconnects, leaving Christabel confounded, but Geraldine confident and capable of taking matters into her own hand from now on. The recurrent mention of the absence of Christabel's birth mother, who had died at childbirth, hangs as an eerie but significant shadowy veil upon the entire scene.

The resultant gap in the father-daughter relationship becomes a yawning chasm when Christabel's father fails to rescue her from the clutches of Geraldine. The poem is a fragment. We do not know for sure what Coleridge had planned for the ending. But, whatever is available to us, shows that Christabel never succeeded in procuring the agency to confide in her father, who looks more and more like a pawn in Geraldine's game. A fragment is supposed to have loose, jagged ends, and *Christabel* is no different in this respect.

Christabel is not exactly a savior, not some Christ-like figure although some critics have come to that opinion (Basar). She is rather a victim, and the nature of her crisis is one that is quite

irresolvable. The woman cannot save herself. This fact should not be directly regarded as a misogynistic move on the part of Coleridge because when we read between the lines, we find that even though her betrothed knight is referred to right in the beginning, he fails to make an appearance to protect her betrothed. On the contrary, she prays for his protection. But, the poem does not indicate that any male has the power to alleviate the situation and undo the indelible curse. The poem might have a medieval setting, but it is not a romance in the usual sense, because of which the poem comes to exhibit a modern approach on the part of the poet. Similarly, the imagery is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition but the ballad is not ideally Christian in nature. The epiphany that occurs in the poem, resultantly is not religious but demonic in nature, as we shall go on to establish.

In the beginning of the poem, Christabel wakes from a dream in the middle of the night about her long lost love, a knight, who is 'far away' (Coleridge 1996, 102). She then ventures from her father's castle into the garden where she encounters Geraldine. This section of the poem is loaded with both contemporary and biblical feminist symbolism. First, Christabel is represented as a bit of a damsel, her long lost love – or rather his absence – has caused her emotional distress. This suggests a historical representation of a woman's relationship with a man, that of her dependence on him. She then leaves her father's castle alone, which symbolizes a more contemporary view of a woman's independence from her father and household: she is breaking out of the private sphere, but only by the seclusion of the night. Christabel chooses to venture into the garden, perhaps a reference to the Garden of Eden, where she meets Geraldine. At first, Geraldine is depicted as a mirror character in Christabel. However, the scene when Christabel and Geraldine sleep together is borderline erotic and the reader begins to sense a sort of corruption of Christabel, akin to the fall of man instigated by Eve and Satan in the biblical story. This familiar notion of Adam and Eve is furthered later on in the poem when Christabel sees Geraldine with serpent-like qualities.

Whether or not Coleridge intended for this poem to illustrate a statement about feminism by adapting the story of Adam and Eve is unclear since he admits the poem is still not finished at its time of publication. However, if he was in fact attempting to make a statement about feminism,

what exactly was he trying to say? By suggesting that Geraldine has snake like qualities – akin to Satan's portrayal in the biblical story – and also corrupts Christabel, he is furthering some contemporary anti-feminist theories that women were capable of corrupting mankind and should be feared. On the contrary, the homoerotic scene he illustrates right after Christabel wakes from her dream about her long lost knight, suggests that maybe females do not need a man to complete them, that they may find comfort within their own sex.

It seems that Coleridge struggled with contemporary feminist ideas. Again, scholars acknowledge that Coleridge studied Wollstonecraft, and portrays feminist ideas in this poem, but he also portrays more conservative and traditional ideas of a woman's role in family, love, and society (Newlyn, 215). This *struggle* with contemporary social change could certainly lead to a fragmented effect on his unfinished, and therefore inconclusive, poem and portrayal of the female role.

Now, the question that we are here to discuss is, are there shadows of Coleridge's vision in the epiphany experienced by Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? Joyce takes notice Coleridge's comment on Giordano Bruno in the essay "The Bruno Philosophy" –

Every power in nature or in spirit must evolve an opposite as the sole condition and means of its *manifestation*; and every opposition is, therefore, a tendency of reunion. (Joyce 2000, 94) (emphasis ours)

When we shall delve into its Joycean definition, we shall find that that 'manifestation' is what an epiphany essentially is. What is significant here is the understanding that an opposition is necessary in order to flesh out the manifestation – the opposition of Christabel and Geraldine, or Stephen and the unnamed bird breasted woman in *A Portrait…* (Joyce 2000, 166), of the male and the female, nature and culture.

So, what exactly is an epiphany? The term derives from the Greek word *epiphanein*, meaning 'to manifest' and in pre-Christian times it was used to record appearances of gods and goddesses. It is a sudden flash of perception and insight. The term has religious connotations and the feast of epiphany, celebrating the revelation of the divinity of Christ was celebrated on the 6th of January. Joyce was interested in these sudden, dramatic and startling moments, which seemed to have heightened significance. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen Dedalus ecomes the mouth-piece for the

Joycean idea of epiphany – 'by an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech, or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself' (Joyce 1963, 211).

It is well known that in his lifetime Joyce produced some 71 epiphanies (Natali, 7). Stephen says that the 'apprehension of beauty involves recognition of integrity, wholeness, symmetry and radiance' (Joyce 2000, 206). Epiphany is a momentary occurrence, a moment when:

> Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany. (Joyce 1963, 211).

Keeping in mind Joyce's views on the epiphany, we can easily see how the first vision of Geraldine is not epiphanic in nature although it meets some of the conditions. As Christabel 'prayeth' for her lover beside the giant oak-tree, she sees Geraldine. Her appearance is sudden, dramatic and startling. The mystery of Geraldine reveals itself through her speech and gestures as she softly whispers to Christabel, the story of her disappearance. But the mystery revealed here is a deception – it, very likely, is not true and is only meant to entice Christabel's attention and affection.

But, it is Christabel who is being deceived while the experience in these lines is not same for the readers. The ominous undertones in the poem and the eerie atmosphere around Geraldine at once tell the readers that something is not what it seems. Here, we must take into consideration a fundamental factor regarding the position of the reader with relation to the two genres we are dealing with – a novel and a ballad. Joyce adopted the genre of the novel for writing *A Portrait…* in such a way that it shall carry the reader along with its own development. In this kungstelroman, as Stephen grows, we grow with him. His new realizations in life are to a certain extent our own. At the same time, there is a meticulous undertone of irony and ambiguity throughout the novel and these undertones allows the readers to maintain a critical distance from Stephen from time to time. As a result, when the epiphany arrives for the protagonist at the end of Chapter 4, the reader too might feel it in his/her own skin. But, achieving the climactic epiphany is not the end of it all. The novel continues into a further chapter. The reader is thus able to probe the implications,

consequences and gravity of the epiphany. This allows the novel to allow multiple perspectives and depth of understanding, which makes it a truly Modernist work.

In case of a ballad like *Christabel*, on the other hand, the reader is not expected to identify with the protagonist to that extend. A ballad is generally a story told by the teller to the listener, and to that effect we have a narrator who is much less impersonal in nature than is Joyce's. This narrator's skill lies in making us feel for Christabel but not feel like Christabel. Thus, the epiphanic experience in the poem is not meant to arrive to the reader and to Christabel in the same degree and same manner. Going by the definition of epiphany, we can understand that it is the point where Geraldine's true nature is revealed that the epiphany actually occurs. The point referred to is at the end of the part 1 of the poem:

> Like one that shuddered, she unbound
> The cincture from beneath her breast:
> Her silken robe, and inner vest,
> Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
> Behold! Her bosom and half her side –
> A sight to dream of, not to tell!
> O shield her! Shield sweet Christabel! (Coleridge 1996, 109)

What Christabel gets to see at this point is an epiphany for her, for at this moment the true nature of Geraldine is revealed to her, and the force of that epiphany abruptly changes her entire demeanor. But what is that something that does it to her? We do not know. As if to emphasize the fundamental ignorance that the reader encounters at this point, Geraldine next goes on to curse her –

> In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
> Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
> Thou knowest to-night, wilt know to-morrow,
> This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;' (Coleridge 1996, 109)

There is a fundamental darkness at the heart of the poem which makes it most mysterious. The narrative voice tells us about everything about what happened, but for that which happened at the exact moment of the manifestation – its single-most illuminating moment is also its point of aporia.

If we analyze Geraldine psychoanalytically, it is clear that she is Christabel's unconscious mind, brought alive in front of her in a moment of epiphanic revelation. Divining that is possible. We also know what is the implication of the realization – it is a revelation of the essential demonic nature of Geraldine – and it does not concern us the way it does Christabel, because the reader is quite aware of it already at this point in the poem. But, what intrigues the reader and is left impossible to divine is the essential content of that revelation. This fundamental aporia carries the poem beyond the confines of simple Romanticism and into the territory of ambiguity that makes it relevant to contemporary readers.

Geraldine comes from the 'other side' (103) of the oak tree. Indeed Christabel might be viewing half of her own self, after Geraldine undresses. The vision of Geraldine is significant, but its effect on Christabel is uncertain. We are not sure what happens on that fateful night, but it changes Christabel forever. This puts the audience in a state of fascination for what has been described peripherally but essentially left unseen. Mulvey notes that in case of Hitchcock's movies the audience is made to identify with the privileged gaze of the male protagonist that often objectifies the Other – the female protagonist who is presented as an object of sexual fascination. The audience thus indulges in a 'voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze' (Mulvey, 843) without the any consideration of its moral consequences. Identifying with the protagonist means that the audience, who is expected to be male, can leave behind his own self and this guilt-free state of indulgence leads to the view's pleasure.

The fact that the core object of fascination in case of *Christabel* – Geraldine in her epiphanic manifestation – is left as a fundamental mystery means that the reader, who in this case is looking from the eyes of Christabel (without suffering the consequences that Christabel did), is left hanging in a state of suspended pleasure. This instead leads to a heavy state of ambiguity, and the opposite of what Hitchcock brings about – an internal probing. The reader can only fill in the gap left in the poem by looking inside and finding their reference points in their own unconscious. This is what makes *Christabel* so compelling and haunting in nature. This is what made, for instance, Godwin run out of the room screaming the time Byron read the poem to him (Byron, 319). One is not cursed in the way Christabel is. Instead one might encounter the worst part of their unconscious in this

moment of satanic epiphany. Rather than the objectification of the Other, the poem excites our tendency to objectify the Other and at the moment we would indulge in that tendency it gives a demonic twist to the situation so that we end up being the victim before the Other.

Now, if we come to Joyce, we see that, because of the deferent nature of the art-form, the effect of the epiphany is not the same. Nonetheless, see with respect to Mulvey's thesis, there is an essential similarity in outcome. The Other in this case is the so-called bird breasted woman –

> A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird…. Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. (Joyce 1996, 165)

The reader that Joyce's novel prefers is male, same as it is in case of Hitchcock. But, having walk along with Stephen, the audience's gaze has been by now refined to the point where it is aware of the complex relation of sexuality and aesthetics. The content of the impending epiphany (of which, in this case, the writer ensures that we are fully aware of) is principally aesthetic in nature. Stephen has gone through a series of tribulations, at the end of which he has emerged with a more mature understanding of sexuality. Unlike what would seem from the selective bit of quotation above, the epiphany does not insure from an objectification of the Other, but a realization that the sexual to is a component of the aesthetic that the writer is after. The mode of the passage is more devotional at this point, freed of the moral repercussions that a gaze motivated on sexual gratification leads to and evades.

Thus, in this case as well, the reader's tendency to objectify the female Other is caught hold of. While Coleridge casts the reader into oblivion by that trap, Joyce gives it a better turn, making it not voyeuristic but artistic in nature. (How far is an artistic still a voyeuristic? – question for another paper.) Joyce does so by placing the artistic epiphany or aesthetic epiphany in an interesting relation with religion – embracing the possibility of release that religion provides but attaining that enlightenment through artistic rather than religious epiphany. It has to be observed that the Joycean notion of epiphany is a secular derived as much from Aquinas' theory of the principle of Haecitas

as it is on conventional Christian concepts. But, this epiphanic vision allows Stephen "to live, to err, to recreate life out of life" (166) – and this helps him break the shackles of priestly life.

Similarly, the vision of Geraldine is an answer to Christabel's prayers and helps her move beyond the shackles of conventions and explores life beyond. The consequence is traumatic. Ut it does open up a new life for Christabel, just as the epiphany opens up a new way for Stephen Dedalus. The outcomes vary in that it is essentially mincing in case of Christabel and enliving for Stephen. But, we must remember, that *Christabel* is a fragment and we cannot be sure of the final effects. Similarly, as already noted, Joyce ensures that the reader approaches Stephen's realizations critically, regarding than regarding them as a final solution. Invariable of the outcomes, then, what both the texts demonstrate is that the subject and object – which in this case is an Other that resists objectification – are interdependent. They exist in antithesis to one another: that is, finite and infinite – Christabel's finite loveliness as opposed to the exceeding beauty of the enigmatic Geraldine. It is not by killing or conquering the Other that fulfillment can be attained. Rather, it is by regarding the Other with the lens of demonic mystery or artistic religiosity (another antithesis that operate in a perpetual contestation) that one can attain the moment of epiphany. Our comparison and contrasts between the works of Coleridge and Joyce respectively therefore, can best be explained by quoting Coleridge himself – '[i]n the reconciling and the recurrence of this contradiction consists the process and mystery of production and life' (Abrams, 119).

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